

HENRY M. JACKSON SCHOOL OF  
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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UNIVERSITY *of* WASHINGTON



# TASK FORCE

The Donald C. Hellmann Task Force Program



Removing the rose-colored glasses: Resetting  
U.S. - Turkey relations

2019



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## Executive Summary

*Olga Laskin*

In the midst of a shifting global landscape, the U.S.-Turkey relationship is in a volatile state. Although historically allies, Turkey and the U.S. have begun to drift apart as a result of Turkey's rising self-confidence and willingness to act against U.S. interests. This self-confidence comes as a result of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's successful consolidation of power under the guise of Islam and the flourishing economy of the past seventeen years which has led Turkey to develop a range of interests that do not always align with the United States. President Erdoğan's self-confidence allowed him to go after rivals of the state such as the Gülen Movement and the Kurdish community living in Turkey. These preconditions, discussed in our report's background section, influenced the divergence of U.S.-Turkey relations in other key regions where Turkish and American interests are interwoven. The divergence of U.S.-Turkey interests marks a new era in the Turkish-American partnership. If the United States is to remain partners with Turkey, it must recognize the state of the relationship as it is now and effectively restructure the relationship so that both states can benefit from their prolonged collaboration.

### ***The main areas of divergence this Task Force identifies are:***

- Turkey's secondary position within Western institutions such as NATO and the EU has caused it to seek out new partnerships independent of the West and their allies after the Cold War. This can be seen in Turkey's alliance with U.S. "antagonists", Russia and Iran, as well as their interest in expanding relations with Asia.
- Turkey's significant role in the uprisings of the Arab Spring, pointed to its desire to cement its position as an influential, regional actor in the Middle East.
- Both states' engagement in the Syrian Civil War has placed significant strain on U.S.-Turkey relations over the U.S.' continued cooperation with Kurdish groups in Syria.
- Turkey's waning relationships with U.S. allies in the Middle East coincide with the bolstering of relations between Turkey and U.S. "antagonists", namely Russia and Iran. These new relationships, although not infallible, have been seen by the U.S. and NATO as a threat to their continued security cooperation.
- As it seeks out new partnerships, Turkey has looked toward Central Asia and China as providing alternative opportunities for cross-national economic unions and trade routes; particularly, with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and China's One Belt, One Road Initiative.

***The major recommendations of this Task Force are:***

- To demonstrate Western cooperation with Turkey by encouraging Turkey's continued engagement with NATO and the EU. Turkey will only continue allying itself with the West if it feels as though it is valued as a NATO ally and reaping benefits from the relationship. This should be done with the intention to show Turkey that it doesn't have to choose between its new allies in the East and its historic allies in the West. Both the U.S. and Turkey can benefit from a continued partnership.
- To maintain regional security in the Middle East, we recommend that the U.S. keeps troops in Syria as a buffer to prevent physical confrontation between Turkey and the YPG. The U.S. should do this while simultaneously encouraging talks between the PYD and Turkey to create a plan for refugee resettlement in Syria and to discuss the fate of the semi-autonomous Kurdish region on the border of Syria and Turkey.
- To encourage liberalization in Turkey, the U.S. should work with the Turkish government to achieve mutual goals rather than dictating Turkey's actions. The U.S. should understand Turkish interests and support them when they align with U.S. goals. This builds trust between the two states by offering a mutually beneficial, transactional relationship rather than the subservient one that Turkey has been subject to in the past.

It is impossible for Turkey and the U.S. to revert to the partnership they had during the Cold War era. In order to maintain their relationship going forward, the U.S. should be aware of the new reality that guides its relations with Turkey and be ready to accommodate Turkish policy goals while promoting cooperation with the United States.

## Introduction

*Olga Laskin*

***“Turkey may be an ally in the formal sense, but it is no partner.” - Stephen Cook***

Rising tension between the United States and Turkey, a historic ally in the Middle East with the second largest army in NATO, has created a significant quandary for U.S. policymakers. Whether attacking U.S.-backed forces in Syria, supporting President Maduro in Venezuela after the U.S. called for him to step down, or engaging in verbal warfare on Twitter, Turkey has been acting more and more like an independent, unruly actor with its own interests than a partner of the U.S. that works toward common goals. Although the two states have a historic relationship, it seems that in the shifting global landscape, that relationship is at threat. Our Task Force analyzes the divergence of U.S.-Turkey interests in NATO, the EU, the Middle East, Russia, China, and Central Asia, and recommends the U.S. maintain its relationship with Turkey by securing cooperation in regions where the U.S. and Turkey share mutual goals.

Shared values and economic cooperation have historically provided a basis for collaboration between the United States and Turkey. In the post-Ottoman era, Atatürk’s reforms—which pushed for the Westernization of Turkey—provided a platform by which Turkey and the U.S. could operate under mutual understanding. Kemalism brought the Middle Eastern state and its diplomatic interests closer to the U.S. and therefore laid the groundwork for their subsequent partnership.

That partnership was cemented during the Cold War as Turkish-American interests converged under a common threat—the Soviet Union. For the former, the USSR’s expansionist policy posed a direct threat to its diplomatic and economic interests; the latter, an ideological and nuclear threat that challenged American predominance. Consequently, Turkey was granted admission into the Western security alliance, NATO, in 1952 because it was recognized by the U.S. as being uniquely positioned to limit the expansion of Soviet influence.<sup>1</sup> Turkey was championed as a crucial geostrategic partner, the U.S.’ key to the Middle East, and later, as an exemplary, developing Muslim-majority society that would be a guiding light of modernization in the region.

However, with the end of the Cold War came the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and subsequently, the anti-Soviet policy goals which aligned Turkey and the U.S. In the new global framework of the early 1990’s, the two states sought to redefine their relationship in a way that accounted for their cross-regional interests. American security interests found a new regional focus in the resource-rich

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<sup>1</sup>Stephen Cook. *Neither Friend Nor Foe: The Future of U.S.-Turkey Relations*. (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations, November 2018).

Middle East, where Turkey's aid and participation in the First Gulf War furthered the bilateral alliance.<sup>2</sup> In return, the U.S. sought to strengthen Turkey's ties to the West through supporting its bid for EU accession, exercising joint military ventures, and providing protection under the U.S.' nuclear umbrella. In doing so, the U.S. intended to bolster Turkey as its Western outpost in the Middle East.

In the new millennia, the two states have seen another round of restructuring interests which caused U.S.-Turkey relations to drift apart under a ceaselessly changing, neoliberal world order. Turkish-American relations were tested during the 2003 Iraq War and throughout the U.S.' War on Terror. In 2003, the Turkish Grand Assembly refused to allow the U.S. to use Turkish military bases to carry out operations against Iraq. During the same year, tensions were heightened by "the hood event" where Turkish military personnel were captured and interrogated by the U.S. military. Following these events, the U.S.-Turkey alliance remained rocky. By adopting a "with us or against us" policy in the Middle East, former President George W. Bush caused Turkey to question its pro-U.S. stance.

Our Task Force argues that Erdoğan's successful consolidation of power by using political Islam over the past two decades along with significant economic growth, contributed to Turkey's confidence as a growing power that doesn't need to rely on the U.S. This caused Turkey to take a harsher stance on issues that concern the U.S., such as questioning the Gülen Movement and going after the Kurdish minority in Turkey. Turkey seeks to solidify its dominance as a regional actor and fill the Middle East power vacuum left behind in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and Syrian Civil War—whether in alliance with the U.S. or not.

U.S. and Turkey's diverging interests are most visible in areas of the Middle East—Syria, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran—as well as the unmooring of Turkey from NATO and the EU. It is also apparent as Turkey faces eastward in pursuit of new partnerships with rising global actors such as Russia, Central Asian countries, and China. Turkey and the U.S.' relationship is skating on thin ice. The U.S. should accept that it cannot rely on Turkey to be the partner it once was and instead find ways to maintain the U.S.-Turkey relationship as it is now; recognizing that there are areas in which the U.S. and Turkey can or cannot work together.

Going forward the U.S. should remain conscious of its relationship with Turkey as a NATO partner and regional asset. Despite tensions between the two states, Turkey stands to gain from maintaining a strong relationship with its Western partners. It's export-led economy is heavily reliant on trade with Europe and the U.S.; and the majority of its foreign direct investment comes from Europe and the United

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<sup>2</sup> Ekavi Athanassopoulou, "American-Turkish Relations Since the End of the Cold War", *Middle East Policy Council*, 8, no. 3 (2001): 144-164.

States. President Erdoğan's administration relies on a healthy economy to bolster popular support meaning his administration is critically tied to Western economic institutions. However, in a changing global landscape, diverging Turkish-American interests could lead to Turkey realigning itself with Russia, China, and other emerging world powers; finding new pathways towards resources and security. U.S. foreign policy towards Turkey in the coming years has the potential to redefine the bilateral alliance and leave lasting cross-regional consequences.

## Setting the Stage

Recent reforms within Turkish politics and society have led Turkey to reevaluate its foreign policy interests and global partnerships. These changes set a precedent for the divergence of U.S.-Turkey interests. The chapters that follow, outline these reforms and offer themselves as a basis that must be understood before delving into the contemporary conflict that exists between the United States and Turkey. By no means is this a comprehensive understanding of Turkish history, politics, nor a prophetic forewarning of Turkey's place in the world. But as the relationship with Turkey and the United States requires a re-evaluation of partnership, these sections examine the internal influences for key points of contentions between the United States and Turkey as a base that supplements the following chapters.

This section expands on scholarship that looks at the politicization of Islam under President Erdoğan and the AKP administration; the political economy of Turkey that is now a playground for rent-seeking elites profiting with lucrative government connections; Fethullah Gülen, a religious figure shrouded in mystery with alleged connections to the 2016 coup; and lastly the Kurdish minority in Turkey and its historic tension with the Turkish government. Turkey and the United States once had a mutually beneficial relationship that has been met with challenges on part due to these historic concerns we have identified. As a result, many questions how authentic or durable of the diplomatic relations between the United States and Turkey. As Turkey's ambitions in the world and its relations with the United States present a divergence of interests the questions posed in this section set a backdrop for understanding how Turkey and the United State have positioned themselves throughout its shifting alliance.

# Politicized Islam in Turkey

Thomas Pham

## Introduction

Since the founding of the Republic of Turkey, the state has controlled and restricted the use of religion in politics. However, with the rise of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* or the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the boundary that exists between religion and state has become increasingly opaque. The United States should be wary of this shift in Turkish politics, which has historically been driven by economic development and domestic stability, toward the increased emphasis on Islam as a feature of Turkish society. The politicization of Islam in Turkey strains relations with the United States, not inherently because of Islam, but because of the AKP's usage of politicized Islam to consolidate control over Turkish society. Islam has always been a significant facet of Turkish society; understanding the AKP and Erdoğan's ascent to power may be a useful guide towards understanding Turkey's ambitions within the region and how the U.S. can maintain its diplomatic relations with Turkey. Politicization of Islam within Turkey and AKP's wide-spread support should be viewed as a new norm for U.S.-Turkey relations. How Islam has reincorporated itself within Turkey is a concern to the United States as Turkey looks for new alliances within the region and follows the growing trend towards an "illiberal democracy". The United States should be responsive to the AKP's consolidation of power and how it utilizes the guise of Islam to retain and expand its influence.

## History of Secularism in Turkey

The founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 was followed by major reforms in government and society. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (hereafter referred to as Atatürk), the founder of modern Turkey, set wide sweeping reforms in an effort to Westernize and secularize the state. To clarify, it must be discerned that secularism in Turkey does not mean separation of state and religion. Rather it includes the control of religion through state institutions such as *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* or the Directorate of Religious Affairs (hereafter referred as Diyanet).<sup>3</sup> Atatürk's assertive position to secularize the Republic of Turkey, based off the French *laïcité* model, subjugated religion to state authority which elicited disapproval from both sides of the political spectrum: those who supported the presence of religion within the government and those who believed religion had no place within government. The AKP used that distaste, later on, to garner support from groups who had felt previously disenfranchised by a secular Turkish government. This set new challenges for the United States' perception of Turkey as a model of a secular state.

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<sup>3</sup> Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee. *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey*. (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008). p. 33.

## **Diyanet**

Diyanet is the main apparatus of the state to regulate religion. This includes the promotion of Sunni Muslim ideals and Turkish identity through the authorization of mosques, employment of religious clerics (imam), administration of religious public Islamic high schools (known as İmam Hatip schools), and the control over mandatory religious instruction in all public schools.<sup>4</sup> The functions of Diyanet conflict with the U.S' view of Turkey as a model of the secular state within the Middle East. The official Diyanet website outlines its basic principles and objectives which include promotion of Islamic belief and administering places of worship while insisting that religion remains outside of politics. Diyanet also provides religious guidance for those of Turkish-descent living abroad specifically "not to lose their self-identity and be in harmony with the society they are living in without being assimilated."<sup>5</sup> This merging of Turkish and Muslim identity is becoming more important in regional identity politics with other Muslim majority states and Turkic states. It also remains a point of contention amongst the pious supporters of AKP and secularists of Turkey. The U.S. should recognize the centralized mechanism of Diyanet to provide a state-crafted version of Islam which inherently makes matters of religion the concern of the state. It is evident that Diyanet is inseparable from the ideals of Islam as being an influential force of government, religion, and regulation of religious education.

The AKP and Erdoğan have been particularly supportive in the funding of Diyanet. Within the past decade of the AKP's rule in government, the size of Diyanet grew significantly and its budget has quadrupled, amounting to slightly more than \$2 billion. This makes Diyanet one of Turkey's largest state institutions, even larger than that of the Turkish Ministry of Interior.<sup>6</sup> The expansion of funding for Diyanet shows the efforts led by Erdoğan and the AKP to re-integrate Islam throughout Turkish society and to merge Turkish nationalism with Islamist ideals. Although the initial function of Diyanet was to limit the influence of Islam by regulating it through the state, in more recent years, this platform has been used by the AKP to spread Islamist rhetoric which favors Erdoğan and perpetuates AKP control.

### **Era of Erdoğan**

The success of the AKP and Erdoğan was built out of a historic legacy of secularization. Secularization in Turkey has resulted in a series of military coups and dictatorships which were by and large, aims to repress Islam in Turkey. Throughout many years of back and forth, the Turkish governments functioned under varying degrees of secularization. As Turkey's model of secularism disenfranchised the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, "Temel İlke ve Hedefler [Basics and Principle of Diyanet]", December 25, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Svante E. Cornell, "The Naqshbandi-Khalidi Order and Political Islam in Turkey", *Hudson Institute*, September 3, 2015.

religious in Turkey, it brought rise to Islamist opposition parties. Yet, while opposition Islamist parties have existed in the past, none have been as successful as AKP and Erdoğan in securing wide support and maintaining political power. The backdrop was set in the 1990s for a fervent politician to assume a position of power with public and bureaucratic support, mending way a new wave of politicized Islam.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was born in 1954 to a pious family and educated at an İmam Hatip school. His educational background influenced his political ideology and his support of İmam Hatip schools throughout his political career. In the 1970s, İmam Hatip schools were dwindling—the numbers of İmam Hatip schools were at an all-time low and graduates were only allowed to become imam or study theology at university.<sup>7</sup> Those who attended İmam Hatip schools sought political mobilization in the offshoots of Islamist political parties within an environment contentious on Islam and its role in government.<sup>8</sup> Erdoğan's upbringing as a student from an İmam Hatip school led him to be highly involved in student activism for conservative and Islamist political ideology.<sup>9</sup> As a student, Erdoğan was an active member of the Millî Selâmet Partisi (MSP) Islamist political party which was later banned by the Turkish constitutional court because its use of religion was in violation of the constitution which stipulates religion cannot be used in any form for political gain.<sup>10</sup> In 1997, after military memorandum attempted to constrain the politicization of Islam in Turkey, Erdoğan was jailed for citing a religious poem calling for rebellion at a political rally.

As Erdoğan worked his way through various iterations of Islamist political parties that eventually lead to the formation of AKP in 2001, it was Erdoğan's tenure as mayor of Istanbul between 1994-1998, that led many to believe in a promise of political and economic reform following an unstable Turkish economy. The newly founded AKP presented itself as a milder Islamist party than its predecessors. AKP appealed to a broader audience which included disenfranchised pious rural communities and those who had grown weary of political instability and economic crisis. Turkey was at a tipping point and many saw Erdoğan's success in Istanbul as testimony that the zealous and pious Erdoğan was the ideal figure to lead the country.

### **Era of AKP**

The AKP was founded by Erdoğan and a number of political allies as a conservative democratic party, following the ban of their former political party, the Fazilet Partisi or Virtue Party (FP). Despite the AKP's claim of being a conservative democratic party, many secularists and outside observers questioned

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<sup>7</sup> Soner Çağaptay. *The New Sultan: Erdoğan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey*. (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.37.

<sup>9</sup> Gareth Jenkins. *Political Islam in Turkey: Running West, Heading East?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). p.167.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.166.

whether there was underlying Islamist rhetoric that furthered the party's political control. For Erdoğan, the AKP's emergence came at a favorable time that allowed him, as former mayor of Istanbul, to remain a popular figure within the party.

The AKP's association with Islam is explicit and implicit in the ways that it has brought Islam back into the mainstream Turkish identity. A survey conducted in Turkey in late fall 2002 found that 90% of AKP voters prayed at least once a day and 99% fasted during Ramadan. Additionally, a total of 81% of survey respondents saw themselves as Muslims first and Turks second, while 60% said that religious values took precedence over national values, democracy, human rights, or secularism.<sup>11</sup> The identity of AKP's early supporters does not indicate whether the party is indeed more Islamic but the early composition of supporters offers a point of reference for understanding the political party's beginning and eventual sweeping support in disenfranchised regions of Turkey. A Pew Research poll conducted in 2014 found that 69% of participants said that Islam plays a large role in the political life of Turkey, with only 26 % said that it plays a small role. However, in 2002 prior to Erdoğan's ascent, the public was more divided: 45% said Islam played a large role, while 43% said a small role.<sup>12</sup> The increased public support for Islam within the government reflect the societal shift in Islam becoming a facet of Turkish politics.

The AKP continues to be a defining feature of Turkish politics. Support for Erdoğan and the AKP reflects a political rise of previously disenfranchised Muslims within Turkey's increasingly conservative climate. The seventeen-year success of AKP with Erdoğan at its helm is due in part to the development of the Turkish economy but also the usage of politicized Islam that has been met with general support amongst a portion of the population which seeks to undo previous policies meant to separate religion from government. As seen in the previous sections, the Turkish government's intimate role in state-dictated religion made a contentious rift amongst those who welcomed the integration of Islam to government and those who opposed it. The AKP and Erdoğan have been perceptive in recognizing this and utilizing Islam to position themselves through policies that propose the integration of religion and politics.

### **Public support of AKP and educational support**

One of the initiatives that Erdoğan has supported since coming to power is to forge a "pious generation" within Turkish society. Through the Islamic education of a "pious generation" whose whole lives have only known Erdoğan and AKP as protectorates of Islam, AKP incumbency and the reign of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.169.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Wilke, Jacob Poushter and Caroline Klibanoff, "Turks divided on Erdoğan and the Country's Direction", *Pew Research Center*, July 30, 2014.

Erdoğan is likely to continue. A Reuters review of government budget and investment plans showed that spending on İmam Hatip high schools for students between the age 14 to 18 doubled to \$1.68 billion in 2018—nearly a quarter of the total high schools’ education budget. Although the 645,000 İmam Hatip students comprise only 11% of total upper school students, they receive nearly 23 percent of funding—double the amount spent per pupil at conventional upper schools.<sup>13</sup> The substantial increase in funding for religious education seems to be one route that the AKP has utilized Islam to render and maintain political support among the pious of Turkey. The sheer increase of Islamic education from the time the AKP came into power also shows a stark change in society. In 2002, 71,000 students were enrolled in İmam Hatip schools; the figure now is over one million.<sup>14</sup> This indicates that Turkey is making way for the next generation of “piety” which is likely to have profound effects on Turkish politics in the future. The main concern of the United States should be the usage of political Islam within the Turkish government to sustain Erdoğan and the AKP power. U.S. officials should be wary of the AKP’s usage of state institutions to instill the Turkish-Islamist nationalistic rhetoric which may continue to diverge from that of the U.S. and the West.

### **Challenges to the Turkish Model**

Traditionally, the United States has championed Turkey as a model of a modern, secular state in the Middle East. However, Islam has become a focal point of power for the AKP and Erdoğan and is likely to be the new status quo amongst U.S.-Turkey relations. Islam, under the AKP and Erdoğan, has been merged with nationalistic rhetoric that propels its policy and party as the pious choice. Wide-spread support for the AKP and Erdoğan have established both party and person as key players of Turkish politics, entrenched in the fabric of the society. In the 2017 referendum, Turkish citizens voted on a constitutional reform which included changing Turkey’s political system from a parliamentary system to a presidential system, thereby abolishing the role of prime minister. This resulted in an increase of presidential powers to appoint ministers, prepare the budget, appoint senior judges and enact certain laws by decree (in a state of emergency), as well as an increase of members of parliament from 550 to 600. The introduction of the bill was in part to consolidate power for the president and expand on Turkish state of emergency.<sup>15</sup> Erdoğan’s overwhelming power is indicative of a rising authoritarian trend within Turkey—one that is unlikely to change in the near future. The importance of politicized Islam within Turkey cannot be

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<sup>13</sup> Daren Butler, "With More Islamic Schooling, Erdoğan Aims to Reshape Turkey", Reuters, January 25, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Svante E. Cornell, "The Naqshbandi-Khalidi Order and Political Islam in Turkey", *Hudson Institute*, September 3, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Kemal Kirişçi, "How to Read Turkey’s Election Results", *Brookings Institution*, June 26, 2018.

overlooked or ignored in dealing with Turkey in the future. How politicized Islam translates into Turkey's international affairs with the U.S. and the region will be explored in later chapters.

### **Politicized Islam and U.S.-Turkish Relations**

The relationship between Turkey and the United States has changed significantly following the rise of Erdoğan and his party, the AKP. Islam has always existed alongside diplomatic relations between the United States and Turkey but recently it has become a driving force in Turkish domestic politics and Turkey's future ambitions within the region. The United States must be receptive to the new model that Turkey pursues as a regional power. Through the use of a politicized Islam, Turkey is able to align itself with Middle Eastern allies and bolster popular support at home.

There are well-founded fears that Erdoğan's rise as an authoritarian leader will continue to drive Turkey towards an "illiberal democracy". Although authoritarian leaders are not new to Turkey, what makes Erdoğan distinctive is his support among the pious within Turkish society and his clutch on the AKP majority. The historic legacy of secularization made way for the rise of Islamist parties and groomed politicians like Erdoğan to rally support among the religious masses. Diyanet and İmam Hatip schools have become a tool to enforce state-mandated Islam and perpetuate the AKP and Erdoğan's rule in Turkey for a "pious generation". The means in which the AKP and Erdoğan have utilized functions of government, through religion and education, frame Islam as a prominent feature of Turkish politics and society. For the foreseeable future, Erdoğan's new presidential powers will provide him significant control over Turkey.

The primary concern of the United State is how to handle this new political reality within Turkey that will cause the state to seek alliances with others if the United States does not prove itself an asset. A more religious Turkey is by no means the greatest concern for the United States. But a more authoritarian Turkey that will act on its own interests provides concern for the U.S.' partnership with Turkey. As Turkey's current trajectory points towards the closer union of religion and state, the shift in Turkey's political climate warrants the United States' attention to the regional relations Turkey pursues and the iterations of politicized Islam yet to come.

# Political Economy of Turkey

*Oliver Lang*

## Introduction

The combination of Kurdish insurgency, high inflation, and a military coup all added up to make the 1990s a lost decade from the perspective of many Turkish elites. Meanwhile, Turkey's neighbors were making considerable progress: a host of Eastern European countries had become candidates to join the EU and were reaping the rewards of institutional reform.

The end of the 1990s marked a turning point. In 1999, Turkey became a candidate to join the European Union, and, after an economic nose-dive in the early 2000s, elites accepted an IMF program. In the wake of the initially painful effects of the economic crash and subsequent retrenchment, the AKP came to power. Their timing was perfect: the party was poised to vacuum up the economic gains from reforms packaged with the IMF program and EU candidacy.

In the decade after the party came to power, the Turkish economy grew at more than 5% per year,<sup>16</sup> lifting a large swath of the citizenry out of poverty and creating a new middle class. The AKP was able to cash the economic progress out at the polls: since 2002, Erdoğan and the AKP have won 12 elections and referenda in a row. But economic growth also helped the party nurture clients in the business sector—a whole new generation of economic elites benefited from, and could hardly escape, close ties to the AKP.

This chapter will be organized around two questions: first, where does the political and economic power behind the AKP and Erdoğan's regime come from? Second, how is the regime using state institutions to concentrate power—repressing and expropriating political and economic competition? Finally, it will speculate about the future: can the regime change how they rule? Are there incentives that might get it to change? If the AKP and Erdoğan continue to rule the same way, will they lose power? The claim of this chapter is that the Anatolian business elites beholden to the AKP and Erdoğan hold the keys to the regime; they, not opposition groups rallying against repression or voters dissatisfied with an economic collapse, are more likely to decide the regime's fate. Understanding how Erdoğan and the AKP convinced voters and committed to semi-liberal democracy can help answer the first question and explain how the regime came to power. But understanding how the regime commits to rent-seeking elites is the only way to answer the second question and explain how the AKP's policies have led to political violence,

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<sup>16</sup> World Bank. *Turkey's Transitions: Integration, Inclusion, Institutions*. (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2014).

personalization of power, and exploitative economic policies in the 2010s. Understanding when Erdoğan and the AKP cannot commit gives us the best leverage to understand the regime's stability. To be sure, Erdoğan and the AKP can respond, and have responded to economic and political pressures with ad-hoc changes to the economic and political rules that structure the rent-seeking game. But ultimately, the set of possible changes is economically and politically constrained.

The question for the future, then, becomes: is the Turkish regime stuck in a negative equilibrium where each institutional change has consequences that constrain the set of future choices until there are few left? Our tentative answer to this question is that the economic consequences of past political decisions are forcing Erdoğan and his inner circle to make a new set of political decisions. These, in turn, are likely to deprive the regime of the ability to pay off rent-seeking economic elites. In a nutshell, we argue that the political and economic institutions of the regime no longer complement each other.

### **Early years and EU reforms**

Where does Erdoğan and the AKP's economic and political power come from? Part of the answer is that the AKP's economic and political agenda during their first decade of rule largely complemented each other. The EU-driven institutional reforms helped undermine the Kemalist elites ensconced in the bureaucracy—at the time, the greatest threat to AKP rule—by scaling back the Turkish military's ability to interfere in politics. The dual bargaining chips of both EU accession, and further economic growth that accession-mandated “harmonization-packages”, in conjunction with IMF reforms would help bring, ensured that elites got on board with the reallocation of institutional power. The AKP needed bargaining chips because, at the time, the Kemalist elites had a bigger stick: the elites, regardless of the party's impressive electoral wins, controlled coercive state institutions. Moreover, the military, a very Kemalist institution, enjoyed considerable leeway to get involved in politics, and had a long history of doing so. Only the all or nothing nature of EU candidacy—no military reforms, no membership<sup>17</sup>—allowed the AKP to force Turkish elites' hands. Candidacy made Kemalist elites choose between economic gains and military restraint, on the one hand, or an activist military and the economic status quo on the other.<sup>18</sup> Selectively reforming some economic institutions and letting their cronies reap the rewards was not an option for Kemalist elites. In sum, the AKP could make gains in the zero-sum game over institutional power, but only because EU candidacy inextricably tied growth-inductive institutional reforms to limits on

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<sup>17</sup> The Economist, “An UnEuropean Habit”, June 26, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> The implicit counterfactual here is not that there was one set of “Kemalist elites” who wanted economic reform without democratization; rather, bundling reforms with democratization undercut the coalition between secular business elites and an intervention-friendly military so common in MENA politics.

military interference in politics. All the while, the party and its cronies were already capturing a significant portion of the positive-sum gains from an expanding economic pie.

It is true that after early difficulties<sup>19</sup>, EU-driven reforms certainly contributed to broad-based and inclusive economic growth early in the AKP's tenure.<sup>20</sup> But that does not mean that the excessive rent-seeking behavior of economic elites from the past decades was eliminated. Just as before, incumbent politicians rationed credit, and manipulated procurement contracts in order to create rents for favorite economic elites; and, just as before, those elites returned the favor by using a portion of the rents to buy political support for incumbents.<sup>21</sup> Instead, what changed is that the economy grew quickly, so quickly that the AKP administration could both afford to launch massive redistributive programs that directly helped their constituency of poor voters *and* also distribute rents to their favored economic elites. Changes in income inequality can attest to the party's redistribution of wealth: from 2002 until the financial crisis hit, the GINI fell from .414 to .384<sup>22</sup> as the party launched several ambitious social programs. But the changes in the spatial distribution of investment during the same time period are possibly more important because they help show how the AKP's redistributive program could be intimately linked with the creation of a new elite constituency.

As Fig. 1 shows, the balance of investment tilted heavily towards traditionally neglected central regions of the country. These areas, whose income share had fallen in previous decades, were not just home to a large constituency of poor citizens that could benefit from redistribution and social services, but also to a rising class of business elites that had been shut out of state contracting and patronage networks under previous

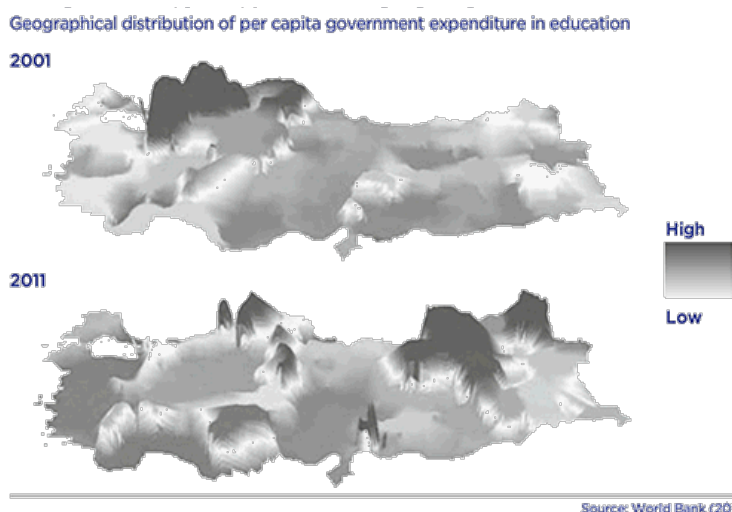


Fig. 1: Geographical distribution of per capita (2001-2011) (Source: World Bank)

<sup>19</sup> The Economist, "A Pivotal Nation Goes into a Spin", March 6, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Daron Acemoglu and Murat Ucer. "The Ups and Downs of Turkish Growth, 2002-2015: Political Dynamics, the European Union and the Institutional Slide", National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series, No.21608 (October 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Esra Çeviker Gürakar. *Politics of Favoritism in Public Procurement in Turkey: Reconfigurations of Dependency Networks in the AKP Era*. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Federal Reserve Bank of St Louis, "GINI Index for Turkey", 2018.

governments. The next section will trace the rise of these elites and their changing role in the AKP coalition.

### **MÜSiAD and the new rent-seeking elite**

In the decades leading up to the 1990s, Turkey's most powerful economic elites were organized through TÜSiAD, a powerful association of businessmen. Based in Istanbul, TÜSiAD exploited political connections with state officials in order to appropriate rents for its members as connected firms dominated procurement. The association also tightly controlled access to benefits: prospects of membership were dim for business owners without existing connections to the elite circles concentrated in and around Istanbul.<sup>23</sup>

By the late 1980s, despite little political support from the Turkish government, a new set of business elites centered around peripheral areas of Anatolia and near the Black Sea started to emerge. These new business elites gained power in the 1990s and started to organize around their own business association, MÜSiAD—the first in a series of such upstart organizations. The differences between the Anatolian organization from its Istanbul-based rival did not just map onto economic and geographic divides of Turkey in the 1990s, but also onto a cultural divide: MÜSiAD catered to “pious” businessmen. Moreover, many of these new elites felt marginalized by the patronage networks concentrated around the Western cities and criticized the existing networks built around TÜSiAD.<sup>24</sup> Whether it was due to the economic success of the regions they drew from or due to the power of shared faith and grievances as an organizing focal point, MÜSiAD and organizations like it continued to grow in power throughout the 1990s. By the late 1990s, MÜSiAD's capacity to solve the Anatolian business elites' collective action problem became clear: the organization was able to extract and appropriate considerable resources from members and work together to challenge TÜSiAD for government contracts.<sup>25</sup>

The ascendant business associations become crucial to Turkey's political economy with the AKP's 2002 election win. The party did not have to create a political machine from scratch or work with the same economic elites as their predecessors. Instead, the AKP leadership could draw on a large network of already politically active economic elites organized around MÜSiAD and other religious business associations. As the previous section highlighted, these elites and AKP politicians shared similar cultural views and grievances, easing association members' collaboration with their political partners in the party.

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<sup>23</sup> Ebru İlhan, “Turkey's State-Business Relations Revisited: Islamic Business Associations and Policymaking in the AKP Era” (PhD Thesis, King's College London, University of London, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.104.

<sup>25</sup> For example, in 1997, 3,000 MÜSiAD members paid to establish a firm designed to challenge TÜSiAD for a utility contract. See Gürakar (2015).

The link between party elites and the business associations continued to strengthen after the AKP's win, as party leaders built close personal relationships with prominent association members: AKP leadership, including Erdoğan himself, often attended and spoke at association events.<sup>26</sup> In return for the monetary and political support of the party, these elites also expected the same type of patronage arrangements that TÜSİAD members had been privileged to in previous decades.

For the AKP's first five-year term, this arrangement would more or less stick: the AKP would slowly tilt the procurement playing field in favor of the new elites at the expense of the old, but not to such an extreme extent that economic growth or EU candidacy was seriously threatened. The deep roots and durability of these networks has continued to play an important role—their clientelistic power as well as their ability to absorb expropriated assets has remained essential to the autonomy of the party.

### **External shocks, the suspension of EU candidacy, and a new model**

By the late 2000s, the prospects for EU accession had dimmed as France elected Nicolas Sarkozy and Cyprus joined the Union. Furthermore, conflict with the increasingly marginalized Kemalist elites started to heat up. In response, the AKP gambled on a new model for the 2007 elections and found early success: Islamist appeals, and economic growth allowed the AKP to overwhelm intra-state opponents at the polls and seek out conflict instead of making concessions. The political turbulence was compounded by the 2008 financial crisis: as the already FDI-dependent Turkish economy was confronted with capital outflows, the government launched a massive fiscal stimulus.

As Erdoğan and the AKP's first term was coming to an end in 2007, they could look back on five years of consistent economic growth and a group of economic elites whose loyalty had gotten them very rich. The election results must have been an affirmation, as the AKP won 46.6% of the vote.<sup>27</sup> With this in mind, the decision by the AKP leadership to pursue autonomous institutional reforms and stray from the candidacy path is not hard to understand—especially considering how serious the two roadblocks to accession were, namely Cyprus and France.

A year after the AKP won the 2007 general election, disaster struck. Turkey, even more than most developing countries, was heavily dependent on FDI; and as the financial crisis hit and money fled the developing world, the Turkish economy was hit hard. The institutionally based economic growth that had kept everyone happy—financing redistribution to poor voters, corporate profits for preexisting elites, and rent-creation for new elites—that growth came to a sudden end. The regime's response to the crisis was a modestly sized fiscal stimulus centered on infrastructure construction. At the center of the splurge:

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Devlet İstatistik Enstitüsü. *Statistical Yearbook of Turkey, 2002*. (Ankara: D.İ.E., 2003).

opaque private-public partnerships that further tied the new elites to the regime. Whereas rent-seeking by the new elites had been somewhat constrained in the AKP's first term, the new fiscal policy and the move away from EU accession radically loosened them.

Moreover, the AKP's rent distribution strategy—still pursued to this day—increasingly came at the expense of the institutional reforms. In order to distribute rents through fiscal policy, the party eviscerated what was left of the procurement reforms passed in 2003 (Law No. 4734). As the party started to systematically dismantle and work around remaining procurement regulations, the floodgates of patronage opened. In 2004, the government still awarded 71% of contracts via open-bidding; by 2014, it was merely 52.5%.<sup>28</sup> The booming construction sector, and the large infrastructure projects that fueled it, were increasingly exempt from regulation. Furthermore, the number and value of contracts awarded through restricted, in other words not open, bidding increased dramatically after 2007.

### **Early 2010s**

By the turn of the new decade, the Turkish economy had, on the face of it, recovered from the crisis and was growing rapidly. However, growth was no longer generated by institutional reform; rather, it was propelled by the construction and spending boom that had started in the wake of the financial crisis but never stopped. This reality was increasingly reflected in Turkey's current account balance—only oversized inflows of short term FDI balanced out the Turkish economy's need for exchange.<sup>29</sup> At this time, Turkish businesses took on massive, usually dollar-denominated, foreign debts. While the exchange rate was favorable, and while the economy was still growing, this was not a problem. But the dependence on FDI left Turkey increasingly vulnerable, as it had been in past economic crises that coincided with capital outflows. In some ways, economic growth and rising standards of living compounded the problem. Since Turkey imports its energy and fuel, when Turkish society gets richer, it shows up in the current account. Macroeconomic pressures starting to threaten the ruling coalition is certainly one of the most important developments in the political economy of the AKP during the early 2010s. Another is the microeconomic guts behind the party's move to centralize power—not only did the AKP systematically push its advantage in its conflict with bureaucratic elites, but party leadership also started a severe crackdown on opposition in society. While the party did its best to remove Kemalist elites squirreled away in the back corners of the bureaucracy, it also started to interfere in organizations that—directly or indirectly—supported opposition politics.

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<sup>28</sup> Gürakar.

<sup>29</sup> Gürakar.

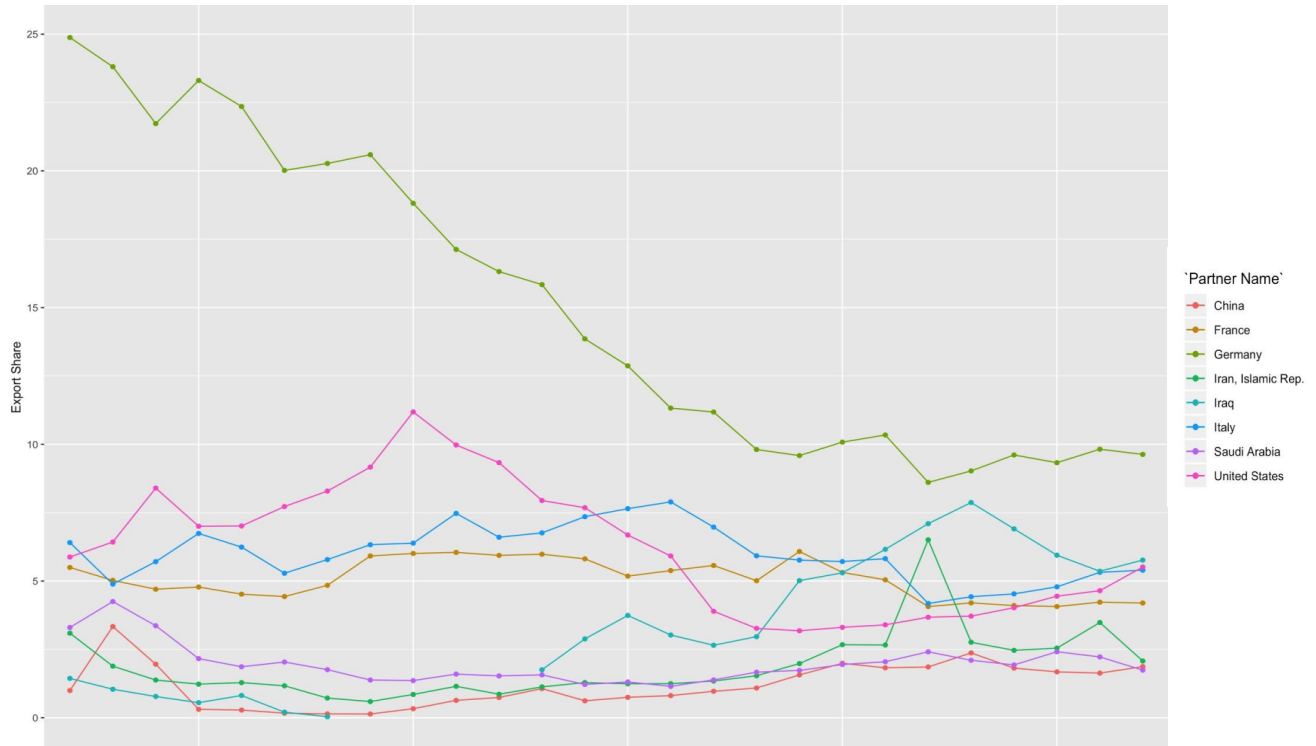


Fig.2: Turkey's Export by Partner Country (Source: World Bank)

Both the bureaucratic purge and the civil society crackdown were not just about getting state agencies and social organizations to do what the party wanted; they were also about appropriating and distributing rents to economic elites in the coalition. The business associations which solved Anatolian economic elites' collective action problem—in turn propelling Erdoğan and the AKP into power—were organized around a key focal point: despite the party's high-minded attacks on corruption,<sup>30</sup> the low-hanging fruit for rent-seeking, medium-size procurement contracts with state institutions were monopolized by the same inner circle of Anatolian business elites. The economic elites behind the AKP benefited from the expropriation that often came with repression; businessmen close to the regime snapped up assets at bargain-bin prices after the owners were coerced, repressed, or even expropriated. The same clientelistic considerations were also in play when the regime turned on its former Gülenist allies: Gülenists in the police intelligence unit had released recordings exposing the corrupt dealings between the Erdoğan family and his rent-seeking coalition. As the cycle of expropriation and repression continues today, the macroeconomy bears the consequences: many enterprises are badly run by those who appropriate them. Additionally, many of those that have escaped expropriation have taken their business outside of the country. Therefore, if the macroeconomic pressures on the economy conflict with

<sup>30</sup> The Economist, "Because We're Worth It", July 12, 2014.

the microeconomic exigencies of the AKP's coalitional politics, what is stopping Erdoğan and the regime from completely prioritizing coalition over economy?

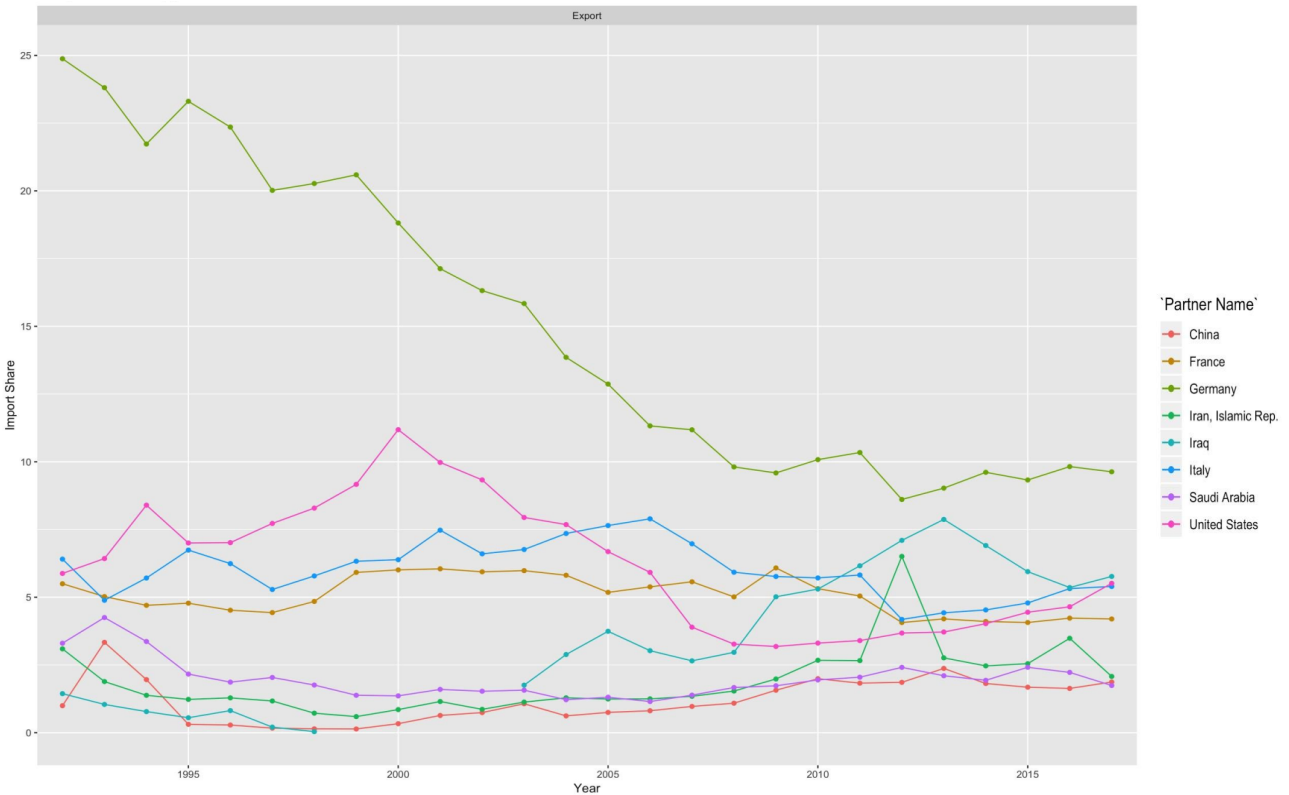


Fig.3: Turkey's Import by Partner Country (Source: World Bank)

The answer, and the one that the history of the early 2010s AKP points us to, is elections. While Erdoğan and the AKP consistently won elections in this period even in the face of serious macroeconomic pressures, the AKP still depends on the success of the economy to bolster popular support. This remains the case even as the AKP has partially succeeded in its efforts to make Islam and cultural issues central to the political arena. Erdoğan and the AKP did manage to make the economy less salient for voters in 2011 vs. 2007, just as long as those voters thought the economy was doing reasonably well.<sup>31</sup> Not only that, but the AKP seems to have also consolidated support among repeat-voters who evaluated economic performance as middling. Nonetheless, when economic performance is evaluated as poor, all bets are off the table. Under these conditions, Turkish society is unlikely to vote for incumbents—even if it voted for them previously.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, while Turkish society's evaluation of the economy may not predict voting as strongly as it did in 2007, it is still unlikely that the AKP will be able to prevail in an election during extreme economic crisis – at least not in free and fair elections. So far, it seems that the AKP is relying on

<sup>31</sup> Ali Çarkoğlu, "Economic Evaluations vs. Ideology: Diagnosing the Sources of Electoral Change in Turkey, 2002–2011," *Electoral Studies* 31, no. 3 (2012): 513–521.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

stopgap measures in order to pretty up a worsening economic picture; like opening government-managed produce stands or blaming economic mismanagement on pretty much anybody else. Whether this will be enough for the party to win future elections remains to be seen. More likely, the current trend will continue: lack of overwhelming popular support will make the AKP more dependent on support from elites and less democratic. In turn, the AKP will have to continue to prop up infrastructure spending and the construction industry while undermining what is left of the procurement process—further hurting the economy and citizens’ perception of it. If this is the case, then the party is truly stuck in a negative equilibrium.

### **The future?**

As the turmoil continues, consumption and investment has fallen while many of the traditional economic elites take their money out of the country. The current situation has begun to resemble the crises of 1994, 2001, and 2009; except more severe. In response, the government—increasingly subject to Erdoğan’s personal whims—has started a massive fiscal stimulus in 2016/17 that consists of government spending and a program to back-up loans to small businesses. As a result, both the Turkish government and Turkey’s larger banks have been saddled with increasing debts. Eventually, the overheated economy has brought about the worst-case scenario for the AKP: high inflation and a plunging Lira. The median Turkish citizen can no longer sustain their standard of living and businesses with foreign loans on the books cannot pay their debts.

After a lengthy standoff with international finance, Turkey’s Central Bank has finally raised rates. The immediate consequences of the crisis and the late response have been brutal. Turkey has likely entered a recession. The question is, who in the AKP coalition will pay as the fiscal situation tightens? So far, many of Turkey’s large banks have taken on much of the burden for the crisis. If the banks fail to rollover their loans, someone will have to step up. Will the economic elites and banks that benefited from their connections to the AKP have to write down their toxic assets or default on their debts, or will the state bail them out, but at the expense of the social spending that has lifted thousands of their constituents out of poverty.

# The Gülen Movement

Hanna Dudsic

## Introduction

The roots of the Gülen Movement have been studied to understand how they led to the falling out of Fethullah Gülen and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, with many arguments emerging. However, who is Fethullah Gülen? Gülen is a scholar, an author, an activist, and also the leader of an international movement called the Gülen movement, or Hizmet, meaning service in Turkish.

Fethullah Gülen was born in 1941 to a family raised in the Islamic tradition. His father was an imam while his mother taught the Qur'an. Gülen was known to have been influenced by Said Nursî who was a Sunni Muslim in the Sufi tradition. His spiritual background provided the basis and inspiration for Hizmet, a world-renowned social movement that is rooted in Sunni values. Hizmet, otherwise known as the Gülen Movement, was created in Turkey in the late 1960s to address the need for better educational opportunities. Since then, it has grown into an international movement, popular within Turkey and beyond, dedicated to the expanded access to education, peace, and civic opportunities. It preaches building bridges between Islam and the West, based off the value of interfaith and intercultural dialogue. The founder's global reach and values are attractive to the U.S. as his tenants speak to a liberal approach, also imagining a world of cooperation between Turkey, the U.S., and Muslim- majority countries.

The Gülen Movement uses education as a means to reach and raise new followers. Since it was founded on the principle of education, the movement has built hundreds of schools around the world. In the late 1990s, there were more than 300 schools and 7 universities aligned with the Gülen Movement globally.<sup>33</sup> The Gülen schools in Turkey have a reputation of excelling in education over state schools, although they do stress conservative values coincident with that of Gülenist ideals. The Gülen Movement's focus on opening more schools and not more mosques to spread the movement's ideals puts it in a unique position to attract a global following because the infrastructure of the movement is not definitively tied to the Muslim identity and because there is no traditional hierarchical structure.<sup>34</sup>

Local circles of workers, businessmen, and professionals congregate in Turkey in both cities and rural areas alike, to participate in these groups. During their meetings, groups discuss religion, technical work, family, and other topics. Participants often look forward to this time as the most important part of

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<sup>33</sup>Yavuz, M. Hakan. "Towards an Islamic Liberalism? The Nurcu Movement and Fethullah Gülen." *The Middle East Journal* 53, no.4 (1999): 584-605.

<sup>34</sup>Though the movement itself states that there is no traditional hierarchical structure, critics speak to its strict, undemocratic, hierarchical structure.

their week. Sociologist Helen Rose Ebaugh speaks to how “assisting one another in a given industry and networking among themselves is one reason that the Gülen business community in Turkey is known as one of the richest communities in the country”.<sup>35</sup> Although organized around regional location, these local circles have a certain pull that extends beyond religion, focusing on community and support. The imam, leading prayers, works to promote a more tolerant Islam, highlighting altruism and the value of hard work and education. People of diverse backgrounds, cultures, faiths all join together to donate their time and financial means. In this way, the movement is now considered transnational in terms of its outreach and impact globally.

### **Impact on Turkish Government**

Despite coming from differing backgrounds, Gülen and the AKP’s alliance proved to grow strong and bring both parties success. The alliance proved to bring prosperity not only electorally for the AKP, but also helped spread Gülen’s message across Turkey through state institutions and education. However, years later, the diminishing AKP-Gülenist alliance proved to be detrimental for both parties. The break hurt not only the spread of the Gülen movement throughout the community, but also the policies of the Turkish state, “including market-driven econom[y], the EU accession process, and the political rights of the Kurdish population”<sup>36</sup>.

How did the AKP-Gülen alliance disintegrate, exactly? Although many analysts have discussed, there is still no exact answer. After the 2009 rift surrounding the governance model, the AKP and Gülen alliance was further strained once again in 2012 following the AKP-attempted rapprochement with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party). The head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization was arrested, and the Turkish government saw this arrest as having been ordered by members from the Gülen Movement to stall the AKP-PKK talks. Soon after, the government ordered prep schools to be closed, with many Gülenist schools to be affected. Tensions surmounted at an all-time high after the 2013 Gezi Protests. A corruption probe targeting AKP officials and conducted by members associated with the Gülen Movement soon started. This probe and its findings were used to defame the AKP during the 2015 elections which resulted in the removal of many AKP officials from office; including the Minister of Environment and Urban Planning Erdoğan Bayraktar, who was quoted to have asked Erdoğan to resign if he was to resign. This momentous event was seen to be one of the main reasons the alliance officially broke.

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<sup>35</sup>Helen Rose Ebaugh. *The Gülen Movement: A Sociological Analysis of a Civic Movement Rooted in Moderate Islam*. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).

<sup>36</sup>Sarah El-Kazaz, “The AKP and the Gülen: The End of a Historic Alliance”, *Brandeis University Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Middle East Brief*, no.94 (July 2015).

While these events are believed to have caused the AKP and the Gülen Movement to drift apart, they do not definitively explain the source of the rift. Many still wonder what led to the split of the alliance. Some analysts attribute this to the differing ideological perspectives of the AKP officials and members of the Gülen Movement. Other analysts argue that it must be the culmination of the start of the new economic regime in Turkey that threatened the Gülen Movement. This understanding explains that the AKP had rid itself of the values that were important to the socioeconomic and ideological views of the Gülen Movement. Critiques of this view state that the market-driven economy proved to be one of the reasons that the Gülen Movement had been so successful in the past.

Ultimately, many are unable to come to the conclusion of why the AKP-Gülenist alliance disintegrated. While some do still point towards ideological differences, others attribute it to the differing leadership styles of Gülen and Erdoğan. Overall, one conclusion we are able to draw is that the split alliance between the AKP and Gülen has proven to be detrimental for the future of Turkey and must be further examined to prevent future conflict.

### **Impact on Turkish Society**

In 2013, twenty-five police officers had been arrested by Turkish authorities, as they were alleged to have wiretapped the then-Prime Minister Erdoğan and other government figures. This had been initiated by the corruption scandal allegations against Erdoğan a year prior based on wiretapped telephone conversations.<sup>37</sup> As Gülen was primed to be the suspect behind releasing these recordings, this scandal was not the single incident that crushed trust between Erdoğan and Gülen. Later, in 2015, another set of arrests had been initiated. Fifty-four arrest warrants and at least forty people were arrested in morning raids that were carried out in nineteen cities,<sup>38</sup> as Erdoğan was preparing to rid Turkey of Gülen's influence right before the general elections. That same year, Turkey issued two arrest warrants for Gülen, on the basis that he was responsible in being a member of a terrorist organization that was forming a parallel state to overthrow the government. While the first arrest warrant accused Gülen of having committed a crime, there were no further details mentioned. Erdoğan's purge of Gülenist supporters extended far, as television stations, newspapers, financial institutions, educational institutions and more were targeted. These measures only brought Gülenist supporters closer together, as they thought to maintain their power against Erdoğan's authority.

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<sup>37</sup>Agence France Press in Ankara, "25 Turkish police officers arrested amid Erdoğan wiretapping scandal", *The Guardian*, August 19, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Ceylan Yeginsu, "Police Officers in Turkey Held in Wiretaps of Officials", *The New York Times*, February 25, 2015.

Later, in 2016, a coup was attempted against the Turkish government. Turkish fighter jets used bombs on the Turkish Parliament and Presidential Palace; 241 people were killed while 2,194 were injured<sup>39</sup>. The impact of this coup was felt all across Turkey, especially in its aftermath: “[M]ore than 45,000 military officials, police officers, judges, governors, and civil servants [had] also been fired, detained or suspended”<sup>40</sup>. Political leaders, such as the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, tried to push Turkish authorities to stop these arrests and purges.<sup>41</sup> Many wondered how the Turkish government was able to make these decisions in such a timely manner, and how exactly it targeted the people arrested. The Turkish authorities argued that its agencies had been investigating Gülen for so long. Although the coup was unsuccessful, there was immense condemnation internationally at its attempt. The Turkish authorities blamed the coup on Gülen and his followers, claiming that it was a terrorist organization trying to overthrow the government. At the same time, others - including Gülen himself - were pinning the blame on Erdoğan himself, saying that it was a way for Erdoğan to potentially strengthen his grip on Turkey in a power-hungry act. A year later in 2017, Germany’s intelligence chief claimed that there was no evidence to be found to prove Gülen was behind the coup and the coup’s organizers remain unknown to this day.

After the 2016 coup, U.S. Pastor Andrew Brunson was accused of helping the individuals who had orchestrated it, while he was working at the Resurrection Church. Soon after, he was imprisoned for two years on terrorism charges before being released from prison in July 2018.<sup>42</sup> His daughter Jacqueline spoke out against his imprisonment saying, “he’s a pawn in a political game between Turkey and the U.S.”<sup>43</sup> Though Erdoğan previously spoke to how Brunson’s release would be conditional upon whether or not Gülen would be extradited, Brunson was still freed. Brunson is not the only U.S. citizen that has been detained in Turkey after the coup.

## **Conclusion**

The break of the AKP-Gülen alliance proved to have consequences for not only for both parties, but for civil society as a whole. Business groups such as the Gülen-controlled TUSKON as well as the Turkish economy as a whole are affected by the widespread political uncertainty that came as a result of the coup. Reports claim that the Turkish government searched for ways to penalize companies that align with Gülenist views. The government also stopped supporting schools and businesses that were linked to the

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<sup>39</sup>Al Jazeera, “Turkey’s failed coup attempt: All you need to know”, July 15, 2017.

<sup>40</sup>Loveday Morris, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, and Souad Mekhennet, “Turkey is expected to curb military power as purge expands”, *The Washington Post*, July 19, 2016.

<sup>41</sup>Mehul Srivastava, “US and EU leaders warn Turkey’s Erdoğan over post-coup crackdown”, *The Financial Times*, July 18, 2016.

<sup>42</sup>Kristina Jovanovski, “U.S. pastor Andrew Brunson released from prison in Turkey, under house arrest”, *NBC News*, July 25, 2018.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

movement<sup>44</sup>. In the aftermath of the coup, the creation of new markets had a strong impact on Turkish civil society. For example, the subsequent boost in construction and urban development in Turkey had enormous effects on what resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands. The real estate markets that were created in the post-coup environment solidified the government's power base. Even projects that were worked on by private sector companies were entrenched in corruption as the AKP regime was heavily involved in how the projects were implemented. Demonstrably, these newly established markets were heavily regulated and closed to Gülenist members and businesses. The Gülen movement in Turkey was eliminated, and the effects on civil society were felt deeply throughout the country.

The falling out of the alliance between the AKP and the Gülen movement represents the shift in Turkish politics towards authoritarianism. Over the past decade, Erdoğan and the AKP governments has been attaining more and more power which leads to seek out and suppress any opposition that threatens the Turkish regime, including former allies. Thorough examination of this relationship offers insight into the rising authoritarian tendencies of Erdoğan's administration and its implications for U.S. policy towards Turkey. As the U.S. moves forward in its relationship with Turkey, it should be aware of Turkey's domestic situation and take an approach that improves Turkish-American relations.

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<sup>44</sup> Hizmet Movement, "Calls to boycott Hizmet institutions denting market confidence", April 14, 2014.

# Kurdish Politics in Turkey

Caroline Overstreet

## Introduction

When considering the future of the United States' alliance with Turkey, the U.S.A.'s policies concerning the Kurdish population are vital to understanding the divergence in the relationship. The Kurdish minority has been systematically marginalized since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 in an intrusive state-imposed effort to maintain the government's territorial integrity. The denial of self-determination—and the violence that has followed—means that Washington and Ankara are in a precarious position diplomatically. Because the Kurdish population has historically been a major point of contention for Turkey, the United States' involvement with Kurdish groups often threatens to impede cooperation with Turkey.

## Kurdish–Turkish Relations

This section will briefly overview the general history of Turkish policy towards the Kurds to put the contentious relationship between the two into context. The section ends with an analysis of why Ankara refuses to consider an autonomous Kurdistan.

Borders are both politically and emotionally important; however, they are drawn, they often result in immediate discontent and extreme feelings. After the Ottoman Empire sided with the Central powers in World War I, the 1920 Sèvres Treaty divided its territory and population among the Allied powers. The treaty planned to establish an autonomous Kurdish region with the right to appeal for independence within a year. However, Kurdish self-determination was not maintained and the establishment of a Turkish state with a deeply divided population forcibly splintered the Kurds among today's Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria while the Kurdish population still grapples with this fracture today.

Turkey's resolute possession over Kurdish territory is due to the nature of the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in conjunction with the nationalism that subsequently surged throughout the population. The nationalistic politics of the Atatürk era prioritized maintaining the territory that was claimed with the 1923 Lausanne Treaty.<sup>45</sup> Subsequently, many Turkish officials, economic and political elites, and Turkish nationalists felt, and continue to feel, that granting Kurdish autonomy would threaten the stability and sovereignty of their nation.<sup>46</sup> The everlasting Kurdish question exemplifies just how strongly the people of Turkey feel that the borders established in 1923 are crucial in maintaining the status

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<sup>45</sup> Åsa Lundgren. *The Unwelcome Neighbour: Turkey's Kurdish Policy*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007)

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

of the Turkish state. The emphasis on territorial integrity paired with intense Turkish assimilation policies indicate why Ankara is so starkly opposed to the idea of granting independence to the Kurds.

Turkey's early policies perpetuated mass assimilation and ignored the intensely diverse identities within the state in an effort to create a united domestic population and stabilize the new nation. The policy of massive internal integration was packaged with a complete political disregard for Kurdish ethnic existence, which can be argued further bolstered Kurdish nationalism.<sup>47</sup> With the economic and political elites pushing for complete assimilation to a single Turkish identity, the Kurds—with their distinctive linguistic and cultural identity— were marginalized. One of the most repressive policies implemented during Kemalist rule in Turkey was to outlaw the Kurdish language. Other efforts for forced assimilation include the Surname Law of 1934 that outlawed the use of “tribal” (i.e. Kurdish) names as surnames, the Provincial Administration Law of 1949 that Turkified the names of places, and the Population Law of 1972 that banned “tribal” names for newborns.<sup>48</sup> These policies signaled that the government not only refused to recognize distinctions of Kurds, but also actively worked to dismantle their customs. Ultimately, Turkey's attempts to eradicate aspects of Kurdish culture furthered the divide between the minority group and the state.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Kurdish political status and its relationship with the Turkish state was further strained. This came as a result of a bolstered Kurdish independence movement and a large-scale response from Ankara, both of which increased the intensity and scope of the conflict. Initially, however, Turkish President Turgut Özal welcomed reformist policies, going so far as to re-legalize the Kurdish language and recognize the “Kurdish reality”.<sup>49</sup> This path towards reconciliation was short lived due to the death of President Özal in 1993. The harmful economic consequences from the Gulf War and the establishment of a quasi-Kurdish state by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq empowered the Kurds of Turkey to expand their independence movement.<sup>50</sup> In a call for Kurdish mobilization, Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) organized demonstrations and attacks on Turkish military posts to bring awareness to the cause.<sup>51</sup> Ankara responded defensively to this surge in the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden. *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism, and the Kurdish Issue*. (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014)

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Robert W. Olson (ed.). *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: Its Impact on Turkey and the Middle East*. (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2015)

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Kurdish movement with military measures, the banning of pro-Kurdish political parties, and state-enforced displacement—ransacking and burning Kurdish villages and land.<sup>52</sup>

The complex relationship between the Kurdish population and the Turkish state has remained tense despite the domestic and international changes of the early 2000s. At the tail end of the 20th century, founder and leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan had been captured, and was initially sentenced to death. Concurrently, Turkey was regarded as a candidate for the European Union, which mandated political adjustments in order to fulfill the Copenhagen Criteria. The newly elected Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP inherited these conditions as they assumed office in 2003. The Copenhagen Criteria, which defines eligibility standards for a country's accession into the European Union, required that Turkey introduce and maintain certain reforms. For the Kurdish population, this meant political and ethnic minority rights, such as the 2002 legislative amendments that permitted the broadcasting and teaching of the Kurdish language. Successful EU membership also necessitated the elimination of the death penalty, in turn excusing Öcalan from this punishment. However, in the 2015 elections, the AKP lost its majority in parliament because of the elected Kurdish-backed Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which sparked violent conflict, eradicating plans for peace talks.<sup>53</sup>

### **Inside the Kurdish Population**

In the face of systematic oppression by the Turkish government, an independent Kurdish identity has strengthened: nationalistic ties of the Kurds in Turkey are often with their fellow Kurdish brethren, even reaching across borders, rather than their Turkish neighbors. But as with all ethnic groups, there are internal differences worth noting. These divisions are centered on religion, economic standing, and political identity; and include differing beliefs about the goals for the Kurdish population, the means by which these goals should be achieved, and Kurdish sentiments towards the United States. Understanding these divisions is vital because they govern the way different factions of Kurds interact with one another, in turn determining the stability and cohesion of the Kurdish nationalist movement as a whole. These divisions also influence interactions between the Kurds and other institutions.

#### *Religious bloc*

The vast majority of the Kurdish population is Muslim, making it subject to the Sunni-Shia divide. About two-thirds of the Kurds in Turkey are Sunni Muslims, and up to one-third of them are Shia Muslims of the Alevi sect. Additionally, a small number of Kurds are Yazidi, a community that has traditionally been

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<sup>52</sup> Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden. *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism, and the Kurdish Issue*. (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014)

<sup>53</sup> Burak Bilgehan Ozpek and Oguzhan Mutluer. "Turkey and the Kurdish Question: Last Exit Before the Bridge", *Iran And The Caucasus* 20, no. 1 (2016): 127-141.

persecuted by both Sunni and Shia Muslims alike.<sup>54</sup> Their oppression, compounded by the Turkish government's unwillingness to protect minority rights, has led many Yazidis to emigrate in order to practice their faith.<sup>55</sup>

The various religious sects within the Turkish-Kurdish population lead the groups to disagree on certain issues such as: how to counter the regional socio-economic underdevelopment, the priority of individual versus collective rights, and whether complete territorial sovereignty is necessary for the Kurdish population.<sup>56</sup> Not only do divisions between the different sects cause internal discord, but the groups also disagree about the degree of secularism that should exist within the state, creating another divide within pro-Islamist Kurdish groups.

#### *Economic bloc*

The socioeconomic hierarchy within the Kurdish population in Turkey is not unique; as is common, wealthy landowners in rural areas and entrepreneurs in urban areas tend to cooperate more with the Turkish government in order to maintain the comfortable status; while lower class agrarian workers seek reform. However, relative economic disparities between the Kurdish population at large and the rest of Turkey are also salient. Historically, the economic policies instituted by Turkey led to widespread underdevelopment in Kurdish populated cities throughout the country. Arbitrating between government compliance and pursuit for socioeconomic justice has led to an ideological balancing act for the Kurdish economic elites.

Tension and hostility between the lower-middle classes and the upper class can be attributed to the fleeting commitment the latter has for the Kurdish independence movement. The bottom two classes—making up the majority of the Kurdish population—regard the Kurdish economic elites as inconsistent, highly dependent on the Turkish government, and weak in the face of opposition.<sup>57</sup> The conflicts between the economic strata of the Kurdish population has contributed to the upper class's capricious allegiance to the Kurdish cause, provoking slight instability in the independence movement.

#### *National bloc*

The different political end goals and the strategies to attain it mean that the Kurds are confronted with the decision of which national group one should identify with. Similar to the differences within religious groups, lower and middle-class secularists generally find their niche in different Kurdish national

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<sup>54</sup> Cuma Çiçek. *The Kurds of Turkey: National, Religious and Economic Identities*. (London: I.B. Tauris &, 2017)

<sup>55</sup> Helen Chapin Metz (ed). *Turkey: A Country Study*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., 1996)

<sup>56</sup> Cuma Çiçek. *The Kurds of Turkey: National, Religious and Economic Identities*. (London: I.B. Tauris &, 2017)

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

movements. The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) is currently the leading national movement, with a few noteworthy alternate groups falling shortly behind.

The national bloc consists of secular Kurdish organizations that differ in political goals, of which the leading legally represented group is the HDP. In the wake of the 2013 Gezi Park Protests, the HDP found momentum and support in public discontent for the AKP, offering an ideological outlet for disenfranchised AKP supporters, marginalized groups, and left-wing oppositional groups.<sup>58</sup> This party plays to a diverse constituency, forcing a meticulous balance between the foundational support for the Kurdish movement and voters to the left of Turkey's mainstream political orientation.<sup>59</sup> The HDP currently holds 67 seats in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, winning 11.7% of the vote in 2018—just above the required minimum for parliamentary representation.<sup>60</sup> Whereas the Kurds find elected representation in the HDP, they find hardline action in the PKK.

Founded in 1984 and internationally regarded as a terrorist organization, the PKK forms the violent revolutionary movement for Kurdish independence. The core ideology of this group is centered on a Marxist-Leninist orientation, a result of PKK-founder Abdullah Öcalan's early life and university education.<sup>61</sup> Historically, the PKK has offered Kurds a unifying outlet via riots, demonstrations, and attacks on Turkish military posts.<sup>62</sup> However, the Turkish state has capitalized on these violent expressions, citing them to justify various repressive Kurdish policies, such as forced dismemberment of pro-Kurdish political parties.

Not all Kurds participating in the national movement align with the HDP or PKK. The Rights and Freedom Party (HAK-PAR) is the second most influential Kurdish political group, established in 2002 by former politicians who sought to establish a party that aligned with their interests. The significance this group is its main political aim: to institute a federal Kurdish region *within* the Turkish state. Holding a similar desired end, the Participatory Democracy Party (KADEP) was established in the wake of the dissolution of a former Kurdish party and promotes Turkish federalism as well. The irreconcilable distinction between the HAK-PAR and KADEP is that the former subscribes to Marxist left-wing politics while the latter identifies as a liberal, social democratic party.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, representing the devout

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<sup>58</sup> Kathleen Cavanaugh and Edel Hughes, "A Democratic Opening? The AKP and the Kurdish Left." *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* 12, no. 1 (2015): 53-74.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Kemal Kirişçi, "How to Read Turkey's Election Results." *Brookings Institution*, June 26, 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Aliza Marcus. *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*. (New York: New York University Press, 2007)

<sup>62</sup> Robert W. Olson (ed.). *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: Its Impact on Turkey and the Middle East*. (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2015)

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

Sunni population is the Free Cause Party (HÜDA-PAR). Established in 2012, its founding leader claims the party has an Islamist solution to the Kurdish issue.<sup>64</sup>

Despite the mutual desire for Turkish reform regarding the Kurdish cause, the wide variety of Kurdish political groups shows just how multifaceted the Kurdish national movement is. The internal divisions of the Kurdish political movement have made this population more susceptible to outside influence and manipulation and weakened their ability to achieve political autonomy.

### **The United States and the Kurds**

The United States has, at times, supported the Kurds. However, Washington's policies have consistently been tempered by the need to protect its strategic relationship with Turkey. Balancing the potential for future advantageous alliances with the Kurds while preserving and strengthening relations with Turkey has caused the United States to act against Kurdish population and its organizations which it previously considered allies. The strife has not been completely due to American actions; the PKK is internationally recognized as a terrorist organization, wreaking havoc in the region and causing mass killings and violent acts. Understanding the origins and trends of the complicated policies between the United States and the Kurds allows one to see there is no easy path when navigating this conundrum.

In 1918, when U.S. President Woodrow Wilson outlined his fourteen points as a blueprint for world peace, the twelfth point set an ideal rhetoric for American foreign policy towards the Kurds. With regards to the ethnic groups under Ottoman rule, President Wilson stated that Kurds should, in conjunction with security guarantees, enjoy an "absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development".<sup>65</sup> Despite Kurdish independence being clearly articulated in President Wilson's address, this opportunity did not come to fruition. The rationale behind the political disregard for Wilsonian values was the prioritization of securing U.S. interests and a strategic partnership, primarily, with Turkey. This conundrum has never ceased to exist, as the tension is exemplified throughout the entirety of Kurdish-Turkish-American relations.

Turkey's shortly delayed membership to NATO was one of the first complications in the Kurdish-American relationship. Because of Turkey's geostrategic alliance with the U.S. via NATO, Washington began supporting Ankara's policy of denying Kurdish demands, even that of minority rights, out of fear that an empowered Kurdish population could cause territorial strife.<sup>66</sup> Throughout the subsequent years of oppression and lack of representation, Abdullah Öcalan established the PKK to channel Kurdish desire

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points." Congress, Washington D.C., January 8, 1918.

<sup>66</sup> Michael Gunter, "The Five Stages of American Foreign Policy towards the Kurds." *Insight Turkey* 13, no. 2 (2011): 93-106.

for change into mobilization. The nature of this group's actions was violent and aggressive, as previously discussed. This led U.S. policymakers to regard the group as "bad Kurds" and treat them likewise, bolstering relations with Turkey.<sup>67</sup> Outside Turkey's borders, the Kurdish population was largely used as a pawn by the United States.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States continues to interact with the Kurdish population in advantageous, strategic ways. This can be seen in the U.S. protection guarantee in Operation Provide Comfort (OPC) after the Gulf War began. Kurdish refugees were facing tumultuous conditions when fleeing to Turkey and Iran, and with the institution of the OPC, many Kurds were able to return home to Turkey and live safely, including many members of the PKK. Turkey's support for the OPC was vital for success, but its support came with strings attached. Turkey used this dependency to justify military strikes into Iraqi Kurdistan in an effort to destroy the sanctuary Ankara believed it provided for the PKK.<sup>68</sup>

The Kurdish conflict continues as an independent Kurdistan has yet to be established. However, public awareness of the Kurdish movement is certainly spreading throughout the globe, an example being the frequent pro-Kurdish demonstrations in Europe.<sup>69</sup> This signals that public opinion supports a stronger outlet for Kurdish voices, which is a factor to consider when the United States proceeds politically.

## **Conclusion**

With the United States' continued political commitment to the Kurdish population and Turkey's fueled opposition to Kurdish independence, the Turkish-Kurdish situation has become a point of major conflict between Turkey and the U.S.' diplomatic relations. Although the U.S.A. has tended to side with the Turkish state when faced with a tough decision, it is time to put the American-Turkish allegiance in question. Without the common Soviet threat that bonded Washington and Ankara throughout the Cold War, and with the Trump administration's decision to withdraw the vast majority of forces from Syria, the practicality of this relationship shifts from a geostrategic necessity to a decision concerning the presence the U.S. seeks to have in the region. There certainly still are military, political, and economic advantages to a benevolent partnership with Ankara, however, with a continued divergence in interests and ideological framework between the two states, there is room for reconsidering Washington's allegiances. The Kurds have generally been open to a partnership with the United States, and while the U.S.' global superiority plays a large role in this willingness, developing a bilateral relationship with the oppressed minority group could maintain American presence in the region while remaining committed to the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Gunter, "The Five Stages of American Foreign Policy towards the Kurds." *Insight Turkey* 13, no. 2 (2011): 93-106.

<sup>69</sup> Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden. *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism, and the Kurdish Issue*. (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014)

sentiment of self-determination and minority rights. However, for public and moral reasons, the U.S. would need to tread cautiously as to not to develop a relationship built on the exploitation of the Kurdish population.

## Turkey and the West

Turkey has had long-standing relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) which this Task Force would be amiss to not cover. These relationships also serve as important case studies in understanding current diverging interests between the United States and Turkey. NATO and Turkey have a history of cooperation; however, in recent years Turkey has begun to pursue new security options. This has led to tensions with both NATO and the United States which can be resolved through further support from NATO to Turkey. The EU and Turkey have had an ongoing relationship that included economic support and talks of Turkey's accession to the EU. While the accession process has stalled there are still areas of cooperation for the EU and Turkey, namely in working together to solve the Syrian refugee crisis as well as both parties desire for more stability in the Middle East. The following chapters examine how Turkey, in gaining self-confidence, was able to work with the West while starting to promote its own self-interests outside of these organizations. The self-confidence that Turkey has found allowed the state to work outside of and possibly against the United States' interests in the region which displays the recent divergence of the two states' interests. Furthermore, the chapters offer policy options which the United States could implement in order to better the United States' relationship with Turkey through encouraging continued relations with both NATO and the EU. Although Turkey has been acting in a way that suggests it is moving away from the West, it still has significant ties to both of these organizations. This implies while Turkey's relationship with the West is strained, it is far from over.

# Turkey and NATO in the Post-Cold War Era

Chloe McFall

## Introduction

Turkey has been a state of great geostrategic importance to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since the time of the Cold War. In joining NATO, Turkey has taken part in many important missions to prevent the Soviet Union's expansion during the Cold War era as well as more recent missions following NATO's transformation in the post-Cold War era. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the conditions under which Turkey and NATO have been able to cooperate to solve regional issues in the past in order to provide suggestions for future cooperation. Our Task Force concludes that allowing Turkey to evolve away from the organization would be detrimental to the United States' regional ambitions in spite of the diverging interests of the two countries.

## Background

NATO grew out of the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty which occurred on April 4th, 1949.<sup>70</sup> It was one of the organizations that was created in the aftermath of WWII in hopes of preventing another war of such great destruction from occurring on continental Europe again. Additionally, the North Atlantic Treaty was formed to prevent Soviet expansion and to encourage European political integration.<sup>71</sup> Turkey became an official member of the organization on February 18th, 1952.<sup>72</sup> In fact, the United States was one of the first NATO member states to realize that "Turkey was the only state in the eastern Mediterranean capable of substantial resistance to the Soviets and that Turkey could provide something of a protective screen for the region".<sup>73</sup> Thus Turkey was solidified as a vanguard for the prevention of Soviet expansion and a key NATO ally.

Although Turkey was of strategic importance to NATO during the Cold War, the relationship was tested by Turkey's contentious relationship with Cyprus and Greece. The issue first came to a head for NATO and the United States when Turkey dabbled with the idea to use military intervention in Cyprus in 1964. NATO condemned the possible decision, on the basis of sovereignty, and the former U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson wrote a letter to the Turkish government that stated if the Soviet Union took offence to Turkey's actions and attacked, Turkey would not be backed by its NATO allies.<sup>74</sup> Though it is not confirmed "whether or not "the Johnson Letter" prevented a Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1964, it became

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<sup>70</sup> NATO Website, "A Short History of NATO"

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Fotios Moustakis. *The Greek-Turkish Relationship and NATO* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003)

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p.67.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p.68.

something of a *cause célèbre* in Turkey, and it was regarded by Turkey as a turning point in Turkish foreign policy based on the belief that the US had attempted to undermine and jeopardize Turkish national interests".<sup>75</sup> In 1974, in spite of the United States' lack of support, Turkey invaded Cyprus with the justification that it needed to protect the Cypriot-Turks. While there was significant international protest to the invasion of Cyprus, Turkey decided not to withdraw and remains in Northern Cyprus to this day, which has become an area of contention both for NATO and for the European Union.<sup>76</sup>

At the end of the Cold War, the structures of NATO began to change in order to adapt to new challenges being presented. The assumption by many was that Turkey would become obsolete as it was no longer needed to contain the Soviet Union. Conversely, the reassertion of Turkey as a state of strategic importance with the Gulf Crisis emphasized the state's role in the Middle East and demoted its importance to European security, a primary goal of NATO.

### **Turkey's Role in NATO**

Currently, Turkey provides the second most military support to NATO after the United States. Turkish military personnel have been a part of many of NATO's missions in the Middle East in addition to missions in Europe after the end of the Cold War.

#### *Operation Sea Shield (2018)*

Turkey's continued significance as a member of NATO is most clearly highlighted in NATO's Allied Marine Command's exercise in the North Black Sea during 2018. In response to the annexation of Crimea, NATO has planned numerous exercises to deter Russia from continuing to expand into former Soviet countries. Turkey's involvement in this specific exercise was crucial to the success of the operation as Turkey is primarily in charge of monitoring the Bosphorus strait, which Russia would prefer to have less restrictions on for free travel into the Mediterranean Sea.

Operation Sea Shield was a seven-day, Romanian-led multinational exercise in May of 2018 in an effort to address the challenges that have been presented in recent years.<sup>77</sup> The reason for the exercise was clearly centered on not only the annexation of the Crimea but also to the continued cyber-attacks on Ukraine,<sup>78</sup> as well as Russia's labeling of the opposition powers as extremist.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Fotios Moustakis. *The Greek-Turkish Relationship and NATO* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003)

<sup>77</sup> NATO Website, "Allied Maritime Command - Exercise Sea Shield Exercise 2018"

<sup>78</sup> Andy Greenberg, "The Untold Story of NotPetya, the Most Devastating Cyber Attack in History," *Wired*, August 22, 2018.

<sup>79</sup> Daniel Treisman, "Why Putin Took Crimea," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (June 5, 2016): 47–54.

The exercise was important for maintaining the relationships between NATO member states and in fulfilling the guiding aspects of the Allied Marine Command’s three core missions under NATO which are “maritime situational awareness, counter-terrorism, and capacity building”.<sup>80</sup> Specifically, Turkey provided a frigate as well as supporting ships, submarines, aircraft, and soldiers to increase its cooperation, partnerships, and capacity to assist NATO.<sup>81</sup> Turkey’s involvement in the exercise came at a challenging time for the state as tensions were arising between other NATO members and Turkey for reasons that will be discussed later in the chapter.

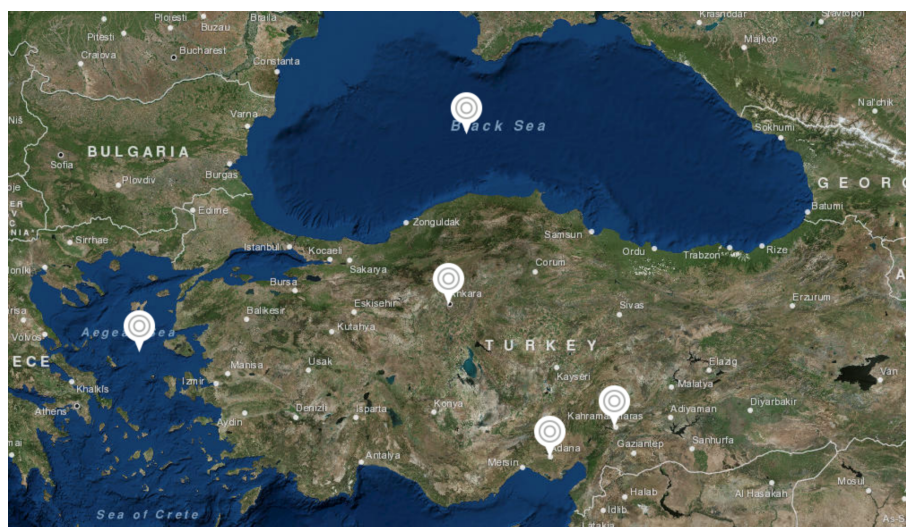


Fig. 4: Exercises and Missions Turkey has taken part in recent years. (Source: NATO)

### *Assistance with the Refugee Crisis*

At the height of the refugee crisis, Turkey as well as Germany and Greece placed a request for assistance from NATO to handle the high influx of refugees. In February of 2016, NATO granted the request and deployed a maritime force in the Aegean Sea with the intention of providing more reconnaissance as well as monitoring and surveillance of illegal crossings to aid the already present Turkish and Greek forces.<sup>82</sup> The NATO operation is providing critical assistance to the region and fulfills its core mission of protecting Europe from outside threats, tying Turkey back into European security. The mission also highlights the cooperation between NATO and the European Union—joint operations have been a standing, cooperative measure between the European Union's border management agency, Frontex, and the Standing NATO Maritime Group 2.<sup>83</sup> While Turkey is only operating in its own waters and airspace, the mission provides a basis for cooperation between the Turkish forces and NATO and is vital in aiding the

<sup>80</sup> NATO Website, “Allied Maritime Command: Operation Sea Guardian Fact Sheet”

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> NATO Website, “Assistance for the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the Aegean Sea”

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

humanitarian crisis.<sup>84</sup> Turkey's involvement in the mission highlights its continued involvement in protecting Europe from threats and also emphasizes its contribution to one of NATO's newer, more ambiguous core missions of projecting stability.<sup>85</sup> In asking for the assistance from their NATO allies Turkey continues to strengthen relations; however, it also highlights the selectiveness of Turkey's involvement in NATO missions.

#### *NATO Support to Turkey*

NATO support to Turkey has been important for strengthening their relations. The first such instance of NATO support to Turkey came at the advent of the Second Gulf War, in 2003, with NATO ensuring that no harm would befall Turkey in the midst of the war. Turkey received an entirely new air defense system from NATO which protected both the state but also the numerous NATO allies that were based out of Turkey throughout the war.<sup>86</sup> NATO also flew numerous AWACS (airborne warning and control system) radar aircraft out of Turkey that provided critical intelligence to all of the NATO members.<sup>87</sup> This intelligence was used by Turkey as part of an early warning defense system for attacks that could be perpetrated against the Turkish territory.<sup>88</sup> This further cemented Turkey's role as a place of geostrategic importance for NATO missions in the Middle East and not solely as a counter balance to the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

In 2012, after Turkish fighters were shot down by the Syrian government, the Turkish state put in a request for bolstered air defenses in Turkey.<sup>89</sup> The request was approved by NATO on December 4th, 2012 and preparations began to ship patriot battery missile defenses to Turkey.<sup>90</sup> NATO designated Kahramanmaraş, Adana, and Gaziantep—all towns along the southern border, where the attack had occurred—as places for the patriot missile defense systems to be set up.<sup>91</sup> The quick and effective response of Turkey's NATO allies to the request for help strengthened the relationship between the two parties.

#### **Arising Crises for Turkish- NATO Relations**

In Turkey's relations with NATO and the United States there are numerous arising crises. Understanding the intricacies of these issues is critical to ascertaining where NATO and United States'

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> NATO Website, "NATO on the Map."

<sup>86</sup> NATO Website, "NATO on the Map."

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> NATO Website, "NATO - Topic: NATO and the 2003 Campaign against Iraq"

<sup>89</sup> NATO Website, "NATO Support to Turkey: Background and Timeline"

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

interests are diverging from Turkey's, specifically as the issues pertain to Turkish-Russian relations, Turkish-Kurdish relations, and Turkish-U.S. relations.

#### *Turkish-Russian relations*

Turkey, in a bid to pull away from the West and to become more independent has sought to find other means of security outside of NATO. This resulted in Turkey's recent purchase of the S-400 surface-to-air missile system from Russia which threatens to compromise the security of all other members of NATO.<sup>92</sup> The purchase of the S-400 missile system was heavily contested by Turkey's NATO allies especially the United States. The United States retaliated against Turkey by proposing the withdrawal of Turkey from the F-35 program<sup>93</sup> and by placing economic sanctions on the country.<sup>94</sup>

#### *The Kurdish Problem*

The United States allying with the Syrian Kurds to fight the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS) has created an ever-growing problem within the U.S.-NATO-Turkey alliance. Turkey was never thrilled with the United States' decision to ally with the Kurds. In January of 2018, as the fight against ISIS began to decline, the Turkish military advanced a ground attack against the United States-backed Kurdish militias in Syria which brought the issue to the forefront of global media.<sup>95</sup> In December of 2018, President Erdoğan threatened to attack the United States' Kurdish allies in U.S.-controlled Syrian territory.<sup>96</sup> In February of 2019, Erdoğan escalated the situation further by accusing NATO of supplying arms to terrorists and not to Turkey.<sup>97</sup> This amounts to a tension-filled situation with no clear end in sight.

#### *The Incirlik Problem*

Incirlik Air Base is situated in a crucial location for the United States and NATO's southern operations. However, the U.S.' ability to operate from the wing is being compromised by Turkish accusations that some American and Turkish officers on the base took part in the 2016 coup attempt and calls for their arrests.<sup>98</sup> These accusations compromise the security of the mission and directly affect the ability of NATO and the United States to carry out their interests in the region. The pressure coming from Turkey led the United States and NATO to consider if they should draw out of Incirlik, however, the base was determined to be too geo-strategically important to abandon.<sup>99</sup> Incirlik is used by both NATO and the

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<sup>92</sup> Al Jazeera, "Russia to Deliver S-400 Missiles to Turkey in 2019," August 21, 2018.

<sup>93</sup> Amanda Macias, "Turkey Begins Constructing Site for Russian Missile System," *CNBC*, September 6, 2018.

<sup>94</sup> Al Jazeera, "Russia to Deliver S-400 Missiles to Turkey in 2019," August 21, 2018.

<sup>95</sup> Carlotta Gall, "Turkish Troops Attack U.S.-Backed Kurds in Syria, a Clash of NATO Allies," *The New York Times*, October 10, 2018.

<sup>96</sup> Missy Ryan and Karen DeYoung, "Turkish President Renews Threat to Launch Offensive against Kurds in U.S.-Controlled Territory in Syria," *The Washington Post*, December 17, 2018.

<sup>97</sup> Al Jazeera, "Erdoğan: NATO Gives Arms to 'terrorists' but Not to Turkey," February 18, 2019.

<sup>98</sup> Kyle Rempfer, "Turkish Lawyers Want to Raid Incirlik Air Base and Arrest US Air Force Officers," *Air Force Times*, August 13, 2018.

<sup>99</sup> Kyle Rempfer, "US Considering Permanent Cutbacks at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey," *Military Times*, March 12, 2018.

United States as a staging base for operations in the Middle East. Its close proximity to Iraq and Iran makes the base irreplaceable by bases in Europe. Nevertheless, this does leave Turkey the possibility of using the base as a bargaining chip which could put the U.S. in a weaker position to argue for its interests in future negotiations with Turkey.<sup>100</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Our Task Force recommends the United States provide more support through NATO and encourage support from other member states in an effort to assure Turkey that it is a valued ally of the West. This would see that Turkey would be less likely to leave NATO—a decision which could leave huge repercussions for the West’s involvement in the Middle East as well as the security of Europe. If the United States and NATO were to provide more support to Turkey in the form of a bolstered air defense system, Turkey could withdraw from the deal with Russia—though it might already be too late. Strengthening Turkey’s relations with NATO would also help to maintain the presence of İncirlik Air Base. The only relatively unsolvable issue with this policy option is the Kurdish issue; however, in drawing Turkey closer to the West it could be possible to facilitate talks as allies to NATO.

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<sup>100</sup> Karen DeYoung and Kareem Fahim, “U.S. Moving to Repair Relations with Turkey, Endangering Ties with Kurdish Allies,” *The Washington Post*, March 10, 2018.

# Intricate Relations Between Turkey and the EU

*Elda Mengisto*

## Introduction

In a 2018 survey measuring the Turkish public's perception of the EU accession process, 78% of the Turkish population said they believe that the European Union doesn't want Turkey to join the EU.<sup>101</sup> After an accession process which has dragged on for a decade and a continuing discussion on how Turkey fits into the ever-evolving European Union, this cynicism echoes persistent sentiments within Turkish government and society. Although Turkey has made an effort to improve its relationship with the European Union, including adopting a variety of reforms in alignment with EU standards, the last decade has seen multiple challenges between the two parties that further strain accession talks. These issues range from rising authoritarianism within Turkey to incompatible policy goals; but ultimately, what stalls Turkey's accession to the EU is both parties' indifference towards the success of the process.

The suspension of the EU accession process is causing Turkey to seek out countries like Russia and China as alternative political and economic partners, which could weaken the United States' influence within Turkey and encourage Turkey's realignment with U.S. rivals. As the United States' relationship with the European Union remains a significant political and economic pillar of support, improving Turkey's relationship with the latter is important not only to keep Turkey as a partner, but also to increase the potential for collaboration on multiple fronts. Despite cynicism from both parties over whether or not Turkey should become a member of the European Union, along with the unresolved relationship between Turkey, Cyprus, and Europe, further Turkey-EU collaboration has persisted through common security and economic interests. Even in light of the rocky relationship between Turkey and the EU, it is important to maintain ties between the two parties if not for practical benefits, then to balance Turkey's potential advantages with Russia and China.

## On the Way Towards Europe

Turkey's cooperation with European organizations during the 1950s, made it seem like Turkey would eventually become part of a new Europe. The process through which Turkey would reform itself to become a member of the European community began in earnest in 1963, with the Association Agreement between Turkey and the European Economic Community (EEC). "[A]fter pursuing inward-oriented development strategies throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Turkey switched over to a more outward-oriented policy stance in 1980. The opening up of the economy was pursued in part with the aim of

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<sup>101</sup> Max Hoffman, "A Snapshot of Turkish Public Opinion Toward the European Union." *Center for American Progress*, September 27, 2018.

integrating the country into the EU”<sup>102</sup> However, it would be another decade before Turkey would apply to begin accession talks in 1987, after a series of crises that included economic turmoil and a coup in 1980. The then- Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Özal envisioned Turkey as part of Europe and believed that EU accession would break the cycle of military coups which afflicted Turkey for decades. The European Commission initially turned down Turkey’s bid because of its human rights record, its relatively large population compared to that of other European countries, and its underdevelopment; three issues which would continue to play out in future discussions and put the relationship in further contention.

The 1990s marked a critical decade for Turkey in its ambitions to become an EU member. The Copenhagen Criteria laid out a guideline for eligibility to become a member of the European Union, stipulating that for any interested parties to be considered for membership they had “to have a free market-friendly, democratic government with transparent rule of law, along with other corresponding freedoms and institutions,”.<sup>103</sup> This made clear the requirements Turkey had to meet to be considered for membership and inspired Turkey to embark on considerable reforms to further the accession process.

### *Cyprus*

Turkey’s involvement in Cyprus has become a contentious issue by which Turkey’s accession process to the European Union has frozen. Turkey’s invasion of Cyprus in 1974 and its ongoing occupation of the island, disrupted both its relationship with NATO and the EU. This was reaffirmed in the 1990s, when Greece used its veto power to prevent the acceleration of Turkey’s accession talks—a reminder of tense relations between the two countries. Turkey’s progress on the way of the EU stalled in 2004, when the Greek Cypriot community voted down the United Nations’ Plan to reunite the two parts of the island, which 65% of Turkish Cypriots supported. Ultimately, this paved the way for Cyprus to join the European Union that same year and further challenged Turkey’s potential for accession.

### **Perception of the “Other”**

By 2005, the Turkish public perception about joining the EU had become overwhelmingly pessimistic. Despite 46% of EU decision makers arguing that European governments support Turkey joining the European Union, this figure does not reflect European public opinion: in a 2017 ECFR survey, only 7% of respondents said they supported Turkey’s membership, with vast majority opposing.<sup>104</sup> In June 2007, only 16% of French population agreed with the idea of Turkey becoming a European Union member;

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<sup>102</sup> Bernard M. Hoekman and Sübidey Togan. *Turkey : Economic Reform and Accession to the European Union*. (Washington, DC: World Bank and Centre for Economic Policy Research, 2005)

<sup>103</sup> Ruth Mandel, “Fifty Years of Migration, Fifty Years of Waiting: Turkey, Germany and the European Union.” *German Politics & Society* 31, no.2 (2013): 66–78.

<sup>104</sup> Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, “The Discreet Charm of Hypocrisy: An EU-Turkey Power Audit”, *The European Council on Foreign Relations*, March 23, 2018.

the number who disagree has since increased to 75% polled in 2017.<sup>105</sup> These statistics are reflected in Germany and Austria as well. For many countries in the EU, it is unclear how they will benefit from Turkey's accession.

Furthermore, despite taking on considerable reforms, Turkey has been continuously denied accession to the European Union throughout the 2000s. At the same time, countries such as Poland, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria were admitted to the EU despite their economies being weaker than Turkey and their democratic structures acting just as unstable. This reinforced Turkey's belief that it was unwanted by the EU and has caused it to question its relationship with the EU. This also calls into question whether Turkey's stalled accession is, in fact, due to political reasons or whether it can be partially attributed to religious, cultural and ideological divides. European culture is rooted in Christian and democratic ideals whereas Turkey has a majority Muslim population that share different cultural and religious values. A European Commission survey suggested that "Europeans share a growing concern about the 'other'—the non-European, non-white, possible migrant".<sup>106</sup> While it is unclear whether this plays a role in Turkey's accession process, it could offer further insight into Turkey and the EU's dwindling relationship.

### **The Ties that Bind—Turkey's Pull Towards the European Union**

In spite of Turkey's recent pulling away from the EU, there are still common pragmatic goals and shared benefits which bind the two parties. The EU accession process encouraged positive political reforms within Turkey and created an economic partnership between Turkey and the EU from which both benefit today. Over time, Turkish society also noted the benefits of a sustained partnership, whether or not Turkey becomes a full member state. In a 2012 survey, the Turkish public was asked what benefits they perceived to have come as a result of Turkey's partnership with the EU; economic stability was the highest picked answer at 32.24%, followed by the ability to study, live, and/or work anywhere at the European Union, at 24.58%. Amongst generations, younger, more educated Turks are more willing to interact with others in the European Union: "[O]verall, the perceived material benefit of the EU to Turkey, such as economic prosperity (i.e. social protection and economic prosperity), and to the self (e.g. freedom of movement), are Turkish respondents' most important expectations of the EU".<sup>107</sup> The following sections will examine these pragmatic ties which continue to bind Turkey and the EU.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Woongjae Ryoo, "Problems of National Identity in an Era of Globalization: Turkey's Bid to Join the European Union", *Journal of International and Area Studies* 15, no. 1 (2008): 37-45.

<sup>107</sup> Gizem Arıkan, "Attitudes Towards the European Union in Turkey: The Role of Perceived Threats and Benefits," *The Perceptions* 17, no.3 (2012): 81-103.

## *Security*

As discussed in previous chapters, Turkey sits in a significant geostrategic location that has been an asset in European security operations. Turkey, according to members of the European Union, is seen as a stabilizer within the Middle East and other vital regions that directly affect European interests: “Despite criticising Ankara’s treatment of Kurds in Turkey, the EU largely shares its opposition to the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in Syria or Iraq. The sides also have a common interest in containing jihadists in the Middle East”.<sup>108</sup> While the EU and Turkey share similar ambitions on what they want to see in the Middle East, they don’t work together to cultivate these goals. Conversely, with further deterioration of Turkish relations with the European Union, Turkey only acts “unilaterally, bilaterally, or multilaterally with European and non-European partners alike on a transactional basis depending on the issue at stake”.<sup>109</sup> The issue that currently binds them is the 2016 EU-Turkey refugee deal, in which Turkey took on three million refugees from Syria streaming towards Europe in exchange for benefits such as six billion Euros and visa-free travel for the Turkish citizens. Through this deal, “Turkey moved from being the smaller partner in its relations with the EU....to one that carried equal weight in the EU’s external relations”.<sup>110</sup> However, the implementation of the deal saw significant complications. The high volume of refugees absorbed by Turkey placed pressure on the state and its domestic stability; meanwhile, Turkish officials can’t seem to agree on how the six billion Euros should be utilized. Nevertheless, this process of collaboration shows how the European Union and Turkey can continue to work together, albeit with a complicated balance of power.

## *Economy*

A significant connection between Turkey and the European Union is their economic ties. With the Turkish economy stagnating and the lira falling, Turkey has had to turn to Europe to get enough monetary funds to keep its economy afloat. Despite the fluctuating political and cultural interests between the European Union and Turkey, both parties continue to engage with each other through bilateral trade via the Customs Union. This initial agreement intertwined Turkey’s economy with Europe’s—bilateral trade between the two parties has increased to “€140 billion, representing 41% of Turkey’s global trade and

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<sup>108</sup> Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, “The Discreet Charm of Hypocrisy: An EU-Turkey Power Audit”, *The European Council on Foreign Relations*, March 23, 2018.

<sup>109</sup> Nathalie Tocci, “Turkey and the European Union: A Journey in the Unknown.” *The Brookings Institution*, November 30, 2001.

<sup>110</sup> Meltem Müftüler-Baç, “Assessing Turkey’s Foreign Policy Choices towards the European Union.” *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 1 (2017): 117-34.

over 70% of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)”<sup>111</sup> as of 2018. Despite hints of cynicism from Turkey about the customs union when it was first established, it witnessed the country’s shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy and made it competitive on the global stage.<sup>112</sup> Other major benefits of the relationship include increased productivity and jobs in both Europe and Turkey, along with the incentives for Turkey to liberalize their government and continue on the path towards accession.

With the changing political landscape in the European Union and Turkey, it is necessary to reform the customs union to heal ties, as they may be the only way to assuage tensions in the relationship. This discussion began in 2017, when Turkish and European lawmakers alike wanted to strengthen the customs union to prevent the relationship from further turmoil. While a diplomatic spat between Ankara and Berlin put the idea into question because of the former’s criticism of the latter, it was short-lived—“Ankara reached out to Berlin in late November 2017 with the aim of mending relations; after talks between Çavuşoğlu and Gabriel, the initiative appeared to be succeeding”.<sup>113</sup> With a perilous economic situation coming as a result of lost trade in the Middle East, Turkey wanted to solidify these ties to prevent economic unrest. For the European Union, the Customs Union keeps the relationship between the two parties stable.

### **Stumbling Blocks**

As the AKP government started using more state resources to maintain political power, it also created policies which eroded liberalism in Turkey. For instance, the Gezi Park protests in 2013 resulted in over 5,000 unwarranted arrests. Three years later, the attempted coup in Turkey accelerated repression through purges of civil society. Turkey’s hardlined response to rising unrest hinders their potential for EU membership: “as EU voices against Turkey’s membership in the bloc became louder, Erdoğan whipped up nationalist fervor against the EU”.<sup>114</sup> The gradual shift in the Turkish government towards authoritarianism indicates several chapters of the accession process will remain shut within the next decade and requires a more substantive focus on more practical issues.

Rising authoritarianism has not only been a trend within Turkey, but the European Union as well. While it was assumed that economic crises would catalyze popular resentment towards the status quo, “it is now evident that populism draws strength from public opposition to mass immigration, cultural

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<sup>111</sup> Samuel Doveri Vesterbye and M. Sait Akman, “A Modernized EU-Turkey Customs Union,” *European Neighbourhood Council, ENC Perspectives*, 2017.

<sup>112</sup> Kemal Kirişçi and Onur Bülbül, “The EU and Turkey Need Each Other. Could Upgrading the Customs Union Be the Key?,” *The Brookings Institution*, August 29, 2017.

<sup>113</sup> Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, “The Discreet Charm of Hypocrisy: An EU-Turkey Power Audit”, *The European Council on Foreign Relations*, March 23, 2018.

<sup>114</sup> Kemal Kirişçi, “Turkey Might Not like the West, but Needs It”, *The Brookings Institution*, August 30, 2018.

liberalization, and the perceived surrender of national sovereignty to distant and unresponsive international bodies”.<sup>115</sup> With the Schengen Agreement allowing free movement of people across most of the European Union, it put further pressure on all countries during the refugee crisis in 2016—something which was not rectified in the refugee deal. The Syrian Civil War, which will be discussed in a later chapter, has led to a massive immigration wave that has put strain on both Turkey and the EU. This manifested in the strengthening of the far-right and the collapse of the center-left in both regions.

## **Conclusion**

At the same time that authoritarianism and entrenched cynicism has pushed Turkey away from pursuing accession talks with the European Union, a variety of interests are pulling Turkey towards pursuing new partnerships in the East. Russia and China’s increased political and economic roles on the international stage have “de-leveraged the democratizing pressure of Western powers, specifically, the United States and the EU. With alternative economic and political partners to the West and dimming prospects for EU accession, [Turkey] worked to diversify [it’s] economic and institutional links”.<sup>116</sup> The frozen accession process also drew Turkey’s attention towards Central Asia. There, “Turkey sees itself as far more European, modern and global, able to reach out and help its Turkic brethren held back by seventy years of Russo-Soviet colonization”.<sup>117</sup> In contrast to the inferiority Turkey feels in its relations with Europe, in Central Asia, Turkey feels as though it can play a “big brother” role and help modernize the region. Turkey has been tempted by a variety of opportunities to split away from its historic allies in the West. However, Turkey cannot fully replace the trade ties and security advantage it has in its partnership with the EU.

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<sup>115</sup> William A. Galston, “The Rise of European Populism and the Collapse of the Center-Left” *The Brookings Institution*, November 30, 2001.

<sup>116</sup> Kadir Akyuz and Steve Hess, “Turkey Looks East: International Leverage and Democratic Backsliding in a Hybrid Regime”, *Mediterranean Quarterly* 29, no.2 (2018): 1–26.

<sup>117</sup> Ruth Mandel, “Fifty Years of Migration, Fifty Years of Waiting: Turkey, Germany and the European Union” *German Politics & Society* 31, no.2 (2013): 66–78.

## Turkey in the Near East

In this section, we provide a perspective on Turkey's regional relations. Turkey's recent policy outside its own borders is a strong indicator of the divergence between American and Turkish interests. In many cases, Turkey's foreign policy presents new problems to American decision makers as its actions threaten American allies, cozy up to American antagonists, and work against U.S. interests in the Middle East and beyond. Standing in stark contrast to Turkey's Cold War foreign policy, Turkey's new foreign policy orientation has been characterized by independence, simultaneous engagement with the United States and its rivals alike, and pragmatic pursuit of its national self-interest.

This section analyzes Turkey's recent actions in the Middle East as well as its growing relationship with Russia and Iran and the implications this has for the future of the U.S-Turkey relationship. The Arab Spring that swept across North Africa and the Middle East, beginning in 2011, presented an opportunity for Turkey to play the role of a benevolent assistant to what appeared to be a large number of newly democratic Muslim-majority states. Turkey's relations with the American allies in the Middle East, namely Israel and Saudi Arabia, have taken on a similarly ambiguous character. Turkey's pro-democracy posturing during the Arab Spring worried the absolute monarchist regime of Saudi Arabia, which felt particularly vulnerable to ideas of democracy and liberalization. Similarly, despite a consistently up-and-down character, Turkey-Israel relations have significantly deteriorated in recent years, to the chagrin of both the Obama and Trump administrations. In contrast, Turkey's relations with Russia and Iran seem to be improving; despite recent hiccups, the trajectory of Turkey's relationship with Russia has been consistently uphill. Similarly, Turkey has adopted a different stance about American attempts to sanction Iran by favoring economic ties with both Iran and Russia. Finally, Turkey's involvement in the Syrian Civil War has placed it at odds with groups partnered with the United States. Turkey is pursuing its own goals within the borders of its neighbors. The United States has found it difficult to cooperate with Turkey on many issues. Both the U.S. and Turkey have proven willing to sacrifice the health of the relationship to pursue other objectives. The outlook is for the most part grim, but it is not opinion of the authors that the relationship is no longer worth salvaging or that a further deterioration of relations is inevitable.

# Turkey's Involvement in the Arab Spring

Erika Arias

## What is the Arab Spring?

After having his fruit cart confiscated by the local police, Mohamed Bouazizi was left with no recourse to sustain his family. His self-immolation on December 17, 2010, inspired revolutions across the Arab world that would come to be known as the Arab Spring. Less than a month later, Zein Al-Abidine bin Ali, Tunisia's President, stepped down and went into exile.<sup>118</sup> Turkey had refrained from making any public comments regarding the events taking place in Tunisia, however, upon Bin Ali's resignation, Turkey voiced its hopes for peace to come out of the demonstrations. Following that ambivalent statement, Turkey declared its support for Tunisia's democratic reform.<sup>119</sup> The affairs in Tunisia and its reorganization pushed other Arab societies to seek reforms of their own. Throughout the region there was a hope for social-political transformation away from authoritarian governments.

Turkey involved itself in the affairs of its neighbors during the Arab Spring. Its position was complex because it aspired to embody its role as a Muslim-majority country, an ally of the West, and a dominant military force.<sup>120</sup> At a time when Arab countries were in political turmoil, Turkey's allegiance with the Arab states and its aim for democracy was a turning point in domestic and international policies which were aimed at correcting for the West's inactive stance. Turkey's activism during the Arab Spring is central in understanding the fallout between the U.S. and Turkey. Wanting to gain influence in the region, Turkey shifted to an us vs. them mentality, condemning the U.S. for its lack of an authoritative stance when it came to the Arab Spring in Syria.<sup>121</sup> By doing so, Turkey demonstrated its dedication towards regional activism to its neighbors concerning the Arab Spring. This would appeal to the protestors who now felt heard and would decide the future leadership of the Arab countries.

Looking to elevate its own political status, Turkey used democratic discourse as a way to involve itself in others domestic affairs. Since governments were fragmented, Turkey sought to reconstruct policies in Western terms that would ultimately benefit its democratic norms.<sup>122</sup> The entirety of the Arab Spring was a process of negotiation and counter negotiations, with Turkey helping to seek a middle ground for its neighbors. Turkey's geographical location makes it a buffer for Middle East and West relations. In

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<sup>118</sup> Birol Başkan, "Islamism and Turkey's Foreign Policy during the Arab Spring", *Turkish Studies* 19, no. 2 (2018): 264-288.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p. 266.

<sup>120</sup> Miyase Christensen and Christian Christensen, "The Arab Spring As Meta-Event and Communicative Spaces", *Television & New Media* 14, no. 4 (2013): 351-364.

<sup>121</sup> Özgür Pala and Bülent Aras, "Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in the Turkish and Qatari Foreign Policy on the Arab Spring", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 17, no. 3 (2015): 286-302

<sup>122</sup> Bülent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar, "Turkey and Iran after the Arab Spring: Finding a Middle Ground", *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 4 (2014): 112- 120.

the region, Turkey has long been regarded as a role model for democracy. As a result, scholars have often seen Turkey as a reliable regional power to serve as a mediator between the West and Arab states.<sup>123</sup> In Erdoğan's election speech after his party's 2011 victory he proposed that Arab countries, "(...) will call for rights in our region, for justice, for the rule of law, for freedom and democracy,".<sup>124</sup> Politically, Turkey looked to strengthen current partnerships and take its place as a regional power. The shared conflict in this region shaped the transnational relations that Arab countries had with one another. Additionally, Turkey hoped to make a competitive and inclusive market. The Arab Spring was a time for massive ideological and social change, presenting the perfect opportunity in which Turkey could promote democracy and economic independency from the West to its neighbors.<sup>125</sup> By doing so, Turkey could improve its own economic ties with other countries in the region and grow its own profits.

A repeated pattern of security cooperation has reemphasized a solidarity within the Arab world, ultimately creating an us vs. them discourse. "Them" being the West, who are only out for individual interests, "us", being Arab countries united by religion, culture and history. Although there are conflicts between the Arab states, they can be dealt with regionally, whereas the U.S. is seen as an outside power being intrusive. The U.S. had been heavily involved in the region during the Cold War and in the War on Terror.<sup>126</sup> However, U.S. involvement in the region dropped during the Obama administration in the wake of domestic problems and declining popular support for U.S. intervention. This left an uncertainty as to what direction the region would take, beginning a regional competition for influence which Turkey hoped to win.<sup>127</sup>

Individual conflicts in countries during and after the Arab Spring also resulted in power vacuums from within, not just regionally. The Arab Spring amplified the power vacuum that existed in the region and the regional activism Turkey began to display put it at the forefront for regional leadership.<sup>128</sup> With an emphasis on the lack of clear direction by any one power, Turkey looked to fill the role. The mutual identity that this region shares created massive "regional cooperation during a period of regional upheaval."<sup>129</sup> In the backdrop of a global financial crisis, Turkey displayed a healthier economy than those around it and served as an inspiration to Arab States. Turkey aimed to garner support from other Arab

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<sup>123</sup> Elizabeth Monier, "The Arabness of Middle East Regionalism: The Arab Spring and Competition for Discursive Hegemony between Egypt, Iran and Turkey", *Contemporary Politics* 20, no. 4 (2014): 421- 434.

<sup>124</sup> Özgür Pala and Bülent Aras, p. 290.

<sup>125</sup> Bülent Aras and Sevgi Akarçesme, "Turkey and the Arab Spring", *International Journal* 67, no. 1 (2012): 39-51.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, p.43

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, p. 40.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, pp.39-40.

<sup>129</sup> Elizabeth Monier, p. 424

states by demonstrating its functioning democracy and economic development.<sup>130</sup> Before the Arab Spring, Turkey had worked closely with several neighboring countries, such as Syria and Iraq, to create a free-trade zone. If Turkey was unable to complete this work, its freedom to interact and increase its leverage in the economic arena would be hindered, which further pushed Turkey to involve itself in the Arab Spring.

With several countries at odds with one another (for example, Saudi Arabia and Iran) Turkey aimed to use the weak regionalism in the Middle East to its own advantage. The weakness was reinforced by the different needs and goals the countries had which resulted in fragile partnerships. As geopolitical rivalries grew, Turkey pressed for new alliances hoping to create a new political alignment in the region. Although trying to achieve regional stability, Turkey was not on the best of terms with other powers in the region. Turkey struggled against the Saudi Arabia-United Arab Emirates partnership in Egypt as well as with Iran's involvement in Syria.<sup>131</sup> Turkey's interjection in others' domestic politics would affect the protests and the proxies in several power blocs. For many, Turkey served as a role model to Arab states because it made use of democracy, a Western-approved political method, without deviating from its Muslim identity.<sup>132</sup>

### **Turkish Involvement in Egypt**

Following its uncertainty towards getting involved with Tunisia's revolution, Turkey was much quicker to respond to Egypt's uprising. During the Cold War and in the 1990s, Turkey had turbulent relations with Middle Eastern states. Having previously followed American interest, Turkey did not support and instead clashed with states around it.<sup>133</sup> Turkey could no longer afford to not have a firm stance like it did during the Cold War. To protect itself and its own interests, Turkey had to be much more attentive to its own needs. Aiming to repair regional relations, Turkey enforced a policy of "Policy of Zero Problems with Our Neighbors", creating a stepping stone with which to involve itself. The policy aims to make Turkey "pre-emptive rather than reactive" while eliminating issues that may arise with its neighbors.<sup>134</sup> It would take a much more active role on the ground and serve as a mediator for regional powers.

Following the 2011 parliamentary elections in Turkey, while Egypt was embroiled in its Arab Spring, the Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan not only took the opportunity to express the outstanding

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, p. 426.

<sup>131</sup> Bülent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar, p. 115.

<sup>132</sup> Burcu Kaya Erdem, "Adjustment of the Secular Islamist Role Model (Turkey) to the 'Arab Spring': The Relationship between the Arab Uprisings and Turkey in the Turkish and World Press." *Islam And Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 4 (2012): 435- 452.

<sup>133</sup> Clement M. Henry and Ji-Hyang Jang. *The Arab Spring: Will It Lead to Democratic Transitions?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 167-170.

<sup>134</sup> Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Policy of Zero Problems with Our Neighbors"

leadership role the AKP had, but also highlighted the multitude of benefits that Turkey had ever since the party's victory.<sup>135</sup> Under the AKP, Turkey used Islam as a way to push its policies, claiming it to be a beneficial tool to unify society.<sup>136</sup> This sense of solidarity was also used to emphasize the need to help its fellow Muslim neighbors. If Turkey was regarded as a model, it could set an example for authoritarian regimes. Having adopted a liberal, democratic government and being a Muslim-majority country, Turkey intended to advance its role in Islamic society by claiming protection of Islamic rights.<sup>137</sup>

The Turkish government pushed for a democracy-centered administration in the hopes of having an Egyptian government aligned with Turkish interests. By supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed Morsi, Turkey could get closer to achieving its goals. As Egyptian military wanted to remain independent, it saw this move as an interference in its domestic politics and rejected Turkish involvement.<sup>138</sup> From the onset, Turkey expressed its support for the protestors on the ground. It was the first country to tell the then-Egyptian President Mubarak to step down.<sup>139</sup> To transform Egypt into a democracy worthy of Turkey's alliance, Turkey gave Egypt a \$2 billion loan as well as an extra \$250 million for a military project in September 2011.<sup>140</sup> Turkey's perception of itself was a driving force to get involved in the Arab Spring. During the Egyptian uprising, Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu called the country the 'Arab brain' of the region because it was able to have a relatively peaceful transition.<sup>141</sup> The Arab Spring presented the perfect platform for Turkey to present its ideas and promote a secular state. The Erdoğan administration insisted that Egypt reform and adopt a secular government, however the Muslim Brotherhood perceived this advice as Turkey overstepping their bounds and infringing on Egypt's domestic issues.<sup>142</sup>

Adopting a secular government allowed Turkey to serve as a balancing power in the region because it was able to appease religious states in the region while, at the same time, remaining an ally of the West. This type of government was promoted because it gave the opportunity to not be seen as a Muslim threat to Christian Europe.<sup>143</sup> Moreover, being secular promoted social peace and a sense of modernization that was needed to let Turkey prosper. To the Turkish government, the use of Islam has

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<sup>135</sup> Elizabeth Monier, p. 426.

<sup>136</sup> Mark L. Haas and David W. Lesch. *The Arab Spring: The Hope and Reality of the Uprisings*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2017), p.202.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, p.202.

<sup>138</sup> John L. Esposito, Tamara Sonn, and John Obert Voll. *Islam and Democracy after the Arab Spring*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 213.

<sup>139</sup> Yaşar Yakış, "Turkey after the Arab Spring: Policy Dilemmas." *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 1 (2014): 98-106.

<sup>140</sup> Mark L. Haas and David W. Lesch, p.195.

<sup>141</sup> Elizabeth Monier, p.428.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> John L. Esposito, Tamara Sonn, and John Obert Voll, p.27.

been much more cultural and less political. Erdoğan promoted secularism to other Arab countries and showed Turkey as a leading example. Turkey had adopted a thriving secular government, one where civilians could take a much more active role in politics and enjoy religious freedoms without the interference of the state.<sup>144</sup> By promoting this type of government, Turkey could build up its portfolio as a leader in the region and aid in the creation of Turkey-friendly administrations.

### **American Involvement in Egypt**

Egypt has been a big beneficiary of U.S. assistance, having received nearly \$2 billion annually since 1979.<sup>145</sup> The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has extended aid to Egypt's democratic functions as far back as the 1990s.<sup>146</sup> In doing so, the U.S. government hoped to promote the American model of democracy in the region and maintain U.S. partnerships in the Middle East. Apart from economic assistance, the U.S. has played an instrumental role in shaping the Egyptian courts. The U.S. proposed an internal economic growth through an "improved court administration and an informed judiciary."<sup>147</sup> Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the U.S. elevated the need for democracy, stressing the importance for national security. Providing aid for democracy was seen as "critical to combat extremism and hence, terrorism."<sup>148</sup> Major steps were taken by the Bush administration to fund governments in the Middle East in hopes of influencing them against anything undemocratic. Another step the Bush administration took to create alliances and promote democracy was beginning the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). At the time, it was necessary to have Egypt as an ally because it could take a leadership role and influence its neighbors, a constant belief that lasted up to the Arab Spring.

Egypt was no stranger to protests, with many organized since the mid-2000s in hopes of revolutionizing the country. With the Kefaya ('enough' in Arabic) movement taking center stage, it was evident the limitations of American-style democracy in Egypt. The inability for the U.S. to actively be in the Middle East during periods of instability and protests reduced the influence the U.S. could have on the outcome of new reforms. To close the gap on those limitations, in 2008, the U.S. invited several Egyptian youths to take part in a technology conference in New York, where NGOs trained them on using social networking sites as a medium to promote democracy.<sup>149</sup> By the start of the Arab Spring in Egypt, youth were well equipped to take matters into their own hands. Newspapers were instrumental in the

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid, p.49.

<sup>145</sup> Erin A. Snider and David M. Faris. "The Arab Spring: U.S. Democracy Promotion in Egypt." *Middle East Policy* 18, no. 3 (2011): 49-62.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, pp.49-50.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, p. 51.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, p. 52.

<sup>149</sup> Ron Nixon, "U.S.-Financed Groups Had Supporting Role in Arab Uprisings." *The New York Times*, April 14, 2011.

demise of Mubarak's regime, often criticizing what they saw as misconduct.<sup>150</sup> Faced with the Arab Spring, the U.S. felt it had to protect its interests and push for the adoption of American values.

For decades, the Mubarak regime had been a dependable ally for the United States.<sup>151</sup> The Obama administration declared that a relationship between the U.S. and Egypt would be based on mutual interests.<sup>152</sup> Similar to previous administrations, the American interests that the Obama administration alluded to were counterterrorism, ending the movement of nuclear weapons in the region, maintaining Israel's security, and protecting the flow of trade.<sup>153</sup> Mubarak had cooperated with the U.S. in anti-terrorism operations, however with mounting pressure from international actors, the U.S. shifted its support from Mubarak to the protestors. Based off the U.S.' values, Mubarak was encouraged to resign.<sup>154</sup>

The United States warned the Egyptian military not to retaliate against the U.S., stressing that if the U.S. was targeted, \$1.3 billion in military assistance would end. Without financial power, the Egyptian administration was left with little to no choice but to compromise with the protestors.<sup>155</sup> On May 19, 2011, President Obama addressed the events transpiring across the Middle East and North Africa. He stressed how important it was for the U.S. to "promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy."<sup>156</sup> To back up its promises and to see Egypt's democracy flourish, the U.S. assured that it would relieve up to \$1 billion in debt and open access for another \$1 billion to rebuild infrastructure.<sup>157</sup>

In 2011, the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reported support for the Egyptian revolution, but casted doubt on the ability for a like-minded Islamist to be appointed.<sup>158</sup> The U.S. was much more concerned with having an authority figure who could maintain the stability of Egypt while lobbying for American interests. If the government became detached and independent, the U.S. could potentially lose an ally. At the same time, Turkey was trying to assure that someone who fit their country's goals was in power.

### **Turkish and American Involvement in Yemen**

Beginning in April 2011, demonstrations against President Ali Abdallah Saleh brought trouble to Yemen. Already considered a weak state, it was instrumental to both Turkey and the U.S. to maintain a level of stability in Yemen. However, depending on its regional alliances, Turkey's approach to the Arab

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<sup>150</sup> Erin A. Snider and David M. Faris, p. 56.

<sup>151</sup> Pierre M. Atlas, "U.S. Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring: Balancing Values and Interests." *Digest of Middle East Studies* 21, no. 2 (2012): 353- 385.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*, p. 361.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, p. 354.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, p. 365.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, p. 365.

<sup>156</sup> The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa," May 19, 2011.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>158</sup> John L. Esposito, Tamara Sonn, and John Obert Voll, p.214.

Spring would differ. For example, Yemen was viewed as a low priority for Turkey because of its distance, but Turkey still supported change. Since Yemen has closer alliances with the Gulf States and has had a history of internal trouble, swaying the government to be pro-Turkey was not a top priority for Turkey. There were other Arab Springs that were much more pressing such as those in Egypt and Libya.

The Arab Spring in Yemen left the United States in a difficult situation. Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh had long been a compliant ally in the U.S. war on al-Qaeda.<sup>159</sup> With the country spiraling into deeper internal chaos, the U.S. was much more concerned with preventing a power vacuum from arising within. Therefore, the U.S. funneled millions to Yemen in the hopes of aiding anti-terrorism.<sup>160</sup> However, anti-American sentiment began to rise as Yemeni officials warned that the call for democracy was intervening with the progress of its internal issues.<sup>161</sup> Yemen was divided by the north and south and the U.S. hoped to create a sense of solidarity and begin dialogue between the two warring sides; but when that failed Saudi Arabia intervened and restored the system that had been in place before the uprisings.<sup>162</sup>

### **Turkish Involvement in Libya**

In Libya, the Arab Spring was sparked by security forces opening fire on protesters. Instead of lasting a few weeks, the conflict went on for several months. Gulf states provided financial assistance but were unsuccessful in keeping a political role.<sup>163</sup> Wanting to solve the issues regionally, the Turkish government was opposed to non-regional actors interfering in the events transpiring in Libya. Additionally, Turkey was motivated by economic factors. The decade leading up to the uprising in Libya was filled with the adoption of a number of economic reforms. Libya had been trying to stop currency devaluation and was determined to thrive as an international oil market.<sup>164</sup> By involving itself in Libyan uprising, Turkey would be able to invest in the economic reconstruction of Libya.

When uprisings began in Libya, Turkish leaders were not in favor of the no-fly zone created by NATO and instead advocated for a cease-fire by NATO forces.<sup>165</sup> The Erdoğan administration hoped to give President Gaddafi enough time to apply reforms to appease the country's instability. If Gaddafi was able to resolve its domestic issues, Turkey could continue the construction and business investments. However, by March 2011, with growing tension and instability in the region, Erdoğan advocated for Gaddafi to surrender and leave Libya.<sup>166</sup> Turkey then transitioned towards supporting the NATO operation,

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<sup>159</sup> Clement M. Henry and Ji-Hyang Jang. p. 238.

<sup>160</sup> Ron Nixon, "U.S.-Financed Groups Had Supporting Role in Arab Uprisings." *The New York Times*, April 14, 2011.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Mark L. Haas and David W. Lesch, p.297

<sup>163</sup> Bülent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar, p. 116.

<sup>164</sup> Clement M. Henry and Ji-Hyang Jang. pp. 195-198.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, p. 195.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

however it made it clear that it wanted Libyans to have ownership of their country's resources. Turkey recognized the National Transitional Council (NTC) and committed to \$300 million in financial support. Apart from its support, Turkey was also a part of military operations to get Gaddafi out of power. Six Turkish aircrafts and five ships were sent to Libya to combat the Gaddafi government.<sup>167</sup> Upon Gaddafi's apprehension and death, Turkey worked towards increasing trade with Libya as well as training Libyan soldiers.<sup>168</sup> Turkey expressed its desire to take control of the Benghazi port and the local airport, which were under control of rebels, in order to provide humanitarian aid to the local population that had been affected by the conflict.<sup>169</sup> Turkey's direct involvement in Libya was strikingly obvious as it kept its military presence in the country.

### **American Involvement in Libya**

The U.S. and Libya did not have the best relationship, dating back to Gaddafi's closure of American air bases in Libya.<sup>170</sup> The connection only intensified with Gaddafi's release of Jihadi fighters from Libyan jails, which went against the U.S.' anti-terrorism campaign. Initially, the U.S. demonstrated a lack of authoritative stance, however, the last straw before the U.S. got involved was Gaddafi's violence against his own citizens which was publicized around the world. With the international audience watching, the U.S. worked with NATO forces to destroy Libyan airfields and missile forces.<sup>171</sup> Unlike Turkey, the U.S. was in favor of NATO's no-fly zone, deciding to "lead from behind" in order to avoid a military intervention alone.<sup>172</sup> The Libyan crisis affected American interests, prompting the Obama administration to justify a military intervention.<sup>173</sup> For the U.S., oil was at risk of being lost, causing immediate action to be taken.<sup>174</sup> Egypt and Libya were the most consequential of the Arab Springs in terms of American interests. The U.S. worried that Libya could become a playground for terrorism because in the past it had housed terrorist groups and provided funding for radical organizations.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Yaşar Yakış, p. 98.

<sup>168</sup> Mark L. Haas and David W. Lesch, p.195.

<sup>169</sup> Burak Bilgehan Özpek and Yelda Demirağ. "Turkish Foreign Policy after the 'Arab Spring': From Agenda-setter State to Agenda-entrepreneur State." *Israel Affairs* 20, no. 3 (2014): 328-346.

<sup>170</sup> Walid Phares. *The Lost Spring: U.S. Policy in the Middle East and the Catastrophes to Avoid*. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid*, p. 60.

<sup>172</sup> Clement M. Henry and Ji-Hyang Jang. pp. 234-235.

<sup>173</sup> Pierre M. Atlas, p. 371.

<sup>174</sup> Clement M. Henry and Ji-Hyang Jang. p. 14.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*, p. 371.

## Conclusion

When the Arab Spring began, Arab societies felt the need to take matters into their own hands. The U.S. preached democracy but stayed quiet and did not assume any immediate position.<sup>176</sup> Turkey, on the other hand, was willing to take charge with humanitarian aid, security and negotiations.<sup>177</sup> Uncertainty persists following the Arab Spring. There is no sure way to know what will happen with the countries that were restructured. The Arab Spring in two countries, Libya and Syria, resulted in civil wars. Due to the September 11, 2001 attacks, the U.S. adopted policies that promoted domestic interests, but ultimately lost it a significant amount of credibility in the Middle East and Arab countries.<sup>178</sup> Given what happened with the Arab Spring, it has proven positive to have a promoter of democracy in the region. Turkey, although not the perfect partner, should still be considered a partner for spreading democratic ideals in the Middle East. The collaborative results that the Arab Spring brought between Turkey and the United States demonstrated that when interests align, a strong partnership can develop. The efforts put forth during the regional conflict serves as the foundation for future cooperation. Turkey demonstrated its potential to be a good partner capable of resolving issues in the region. The U.S. changed its priorities based on the events in the Arab community, as did Turkey, and if the U.S. wants to continue to defend its interests and defeat ISIS it must maintain an active role in the region which means, at times, using Turkey as a proxy.

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<sup>176</sup> Bülent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar, p.114.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Fuat Keyman, "Turkish Foreign Policy in the Post-Arab Spring Era: From Proactive to Buffer State." *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 12 (2016): 2274-2287.

# The Civil War in Syria

Isaac Grams

## Introduction

The Syrian Civil War represents multiple problems for American policymakers when it comes to Turkey. Through its military incursions into northern Syria, Turkey has demonstrated that it is not content to protect its interior and borders, but rather it wants to shape the war in Syria and the peace process to satisfy its own interests. This newly independent, activist foreign policy enthusiastically pursued by the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is a strong indicator that a new American approach to Turkey is needed. Aside from the implications of Turkey's new direction for the U.S.-Turkey relationship, there are also significant military and political problems created by Turkey's actions in Syria. Turkey's alliance with the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the National Front for Liberation, both anti-government groups, brings it into the Syrian War on the opposite side from other major players including Russia and Iran. Additionally, Turkey's strong opposition to the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which are dominated by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which are affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a group both Turkey and the U.S. consider terrorists, significantly strains the US-Turkey relationship and has aggravated the violent military situation in northwest Syria. This means that Turkey's military operations have often been carried out against American partners. Operation Euphrates Shield, Turkey's 2016 military operation in northern Aleppo governorate sought to evict the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) fighters from strategic locations such as the city of al-Bab, in addition to preventing the SDF from connecting its exclave in Afrin district with its main territory extending as far west as the Manbij subdistrict.<sup>179</sup> In the same vein, Turkey's 2018 operation in the YPG-controlled Afrin district sought to, in Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's own words, "[defend] against a build-up of terrorists who have proved aggressive against our population centers."<sup>180</sup>

Turkey's actions in the Syrian Civil War clearly reveal its attempt to reposition itself as an independent, international actor and that realignment's negative consequences for the United States. It is this situation from which U.S. President Donald Trump wished to extricate the United States with his December 19, 2018 order to withdraw the 2,000 American troops from Syria, citing the nearly total elimination of ISIL-controlled territory in the country.<sup>181</sup> However, it is precisely due to the capture of ISIL territory by Turkey and its proxies, the SDF, and the Assad regime that the United States must remain

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<sup>179</sup> BBC, "Turkey 'ends' Euphrates Shield campaign in Syria," March 30, 2017.

<sup>180</sup> Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, "The Meaning of Operation Olive Branch," *Foreign Policy*, April 5, 2018.

<sup>181</sup> Mark Landler et al, "Trump to Withdraw U.S. Forces from Syria, Declaring 'We Have Won Against ISIS,'" *New York Times*, 19 Dec. 2018.

committed to a political solution in Syria. Without ISIL as a common enemy, the three sides of the conflict will begin to see each other exclusively as competitors. The tensions surrounding the last SDF-held territory on the left bank of the Euphrates in northern Syria, the area around the city of Manbij, perfectly illustrates the new but equally volatile dynamic in the country. Erdoğan told Trump on January 20th of this year that the Turkish army was prepared to “take over” Manbij.<sup>182</sup> The previous month, the YPG invited Syrian government forces to the city in the hopes of deterring a Turkish attack.<sup>183</sup> Turkey’s unprecedented interference in the domestic affairs of its neighbor and its disagreement with the United States on the fate of the YPG/SDF-held territory in northeastern Syria makes Turkey’s involvement in the Syrian Civil War a critical issue in the U.S.-Turkey relationship.



Fig. 5: Syria-Who controls what (Source: Al Jazeera)

### Turkey’s Interests

Turkey has four main interests in the Syrian Civil War which have guided the timing, timbre, and scope of Turkey’s involvement in its former-ally’s domestic affairs. Turkey’s primary interest in Syria and its civil war is preventing the establishment of a *de facto*, or worse, *de jure*, Kurdish state along Turkey’s southern border, created out of territory seized from the Islamic State by U.S.-backed Kurdish fighters. More recently, Turkey has made defeating ISIL a priority, largely due to international pressure and ISIL terrorist attacks in Turkey. As we will see, Turkey also finds the rhetorical identification of ISIL terrorists with Kurdish terrorists to be a convenient simplification of its mission in Syria. Turkey has also taken on some four million Syrian refugees, and the prevention of additional arrivals is a priority for the Turkish government.<sup>184</sup> The refugees that have already been resettled in Turkey have placed a large strain on Turkey’s domestic institutions, despite the large sums of money the EU has given to Turkey to assist with the refugees, which has caused the Turkish government to care a great deal about the ultimate outcome of the war.<sup>185</sup> Finally, Turkey wants to be a regional power in the Middle East. It sees an important opportunity to arrive on the regional stage with the Syrian Civil War and has taken it. Significantly, the

<sup>182</sup> Al Jazeera, “Turkey ready to take over Syria’s Manbij, Erdoğan tells Trump”, January 21, 2019.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Selcan Hacaoglu, “A Flood of Refugees Tests Turkey’s Tolerance,” *Bloomberg*, December 12, 2018.

<sup>185</sup> Al-Jazeera, “Refugee Crisis: EU and Turkey Reach ‘breakthrough’ Deal”, March 8, 2016.

United States does not feature prominently in Turkey's calculus concerning the Syrian Civil War. Turkish and American interests do not align in Syria and the Turkish government is not eager to accommodate the United States at its own expense.

The Turkish government is extremely sensitive to the prospect of Syria's Kurdish fighters carving out a state of their own in northern Syria. On June 26th, 2015, President Erdoğan vowed that he "would never allow the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Syria,"<sup>186</sup> fearing the effect of an independent Kurdish state on Turkey's sizable Kurdish minority and radical Kurdish groups like the PKK. As discussed in previous chapters, the history of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict is as old as Turkey itself and has been a guiding influence in Turkish foreign policy. Erdoğan and his advisers believe that a Kurdish state on its border will embolden the PKK and help to radicalize previously moderate Kurds in Turkey. The establishment of an independent Kurdish state so close to the Kurdish-populated region of Turkey would increase the chances of Kurds in Turkey attempting to split off from the country and join a pan-Kurdish state. Therefore, the territorial integrity of Turkey is threatened by a Kurdish state on its border. In order to prevent the establishment of such a state, the Turkish government called multiple times for the establishment of a buffer area and/or a "no-fly" zone in northern Syria which would ostensibly be there to protect the border and resettle refugees. The lack of enthusiasm for this proposal among other major players in the conflict, and Turkey's response, will be discussed later in this chapter.

The safety of its own people is another vital interest for the Turkish government. In response to Turkey joining a U.S.-led coalition to fight it, ISIL carried out multiple terrorist attacks in Turkey in 2015 and 2016, including bombings in Suruç, Ankara, and Istanbul.<sup>187 188 189</sup> ISIL also branded Turkey an "apostate" regime allied with "crusaders"—withering criticism from the Islamic State's medieval perspective.<sup>190</sup> The 2015 breakdown of peace talks between the government and the PKK, partially due to conflict in the Syrian city of Kobanî also facilitated new violent conflict in Turkey's southeast.<sup>191</sup> With the PKK and ISIL both stepping up their attacks within Turkey, the threat posed by terrorist groups became impossible to ignore any longer. From the Turkish government's perspective, terrorist organizations were taking advantage of the chaotic situation in Syria to launch deadly attacks in Turkey. Due to the timing of these events and the longstanding hostility between Turkey and the PKK, the Turkish government began

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<sup>186</sup>The Economist, "Drawing in the Neighbors," July 4, 2015.

<sup>187</sup> Constanze Letsch, "Turkey Releases Bombing Suspect Details as Twitter Temporarily Shut Down," *The Guardian*, July 22, 2015.

<sup>188</sup> BBC, "Ankara Explosions Leave Almost 100 Dead," October 10, 2015.

<sup>189</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, "At Least 42 Killed in Terror Attack on Istanbul's Atatürk Airport," June 28, 2016.

<sup>190</sup> Mustafa Akyol, "Islamic State Ups Rhetoric Against Ankara," *Al-Monitor*, August 11, 2015.

<sup>191</sup> International Crisis Group, "A Sisyphean Task? Resuming Turkey-PKK Peace Talks," December 17, 2015.

to conflate the Islamic State and Kurdish groups connected to the PKK in Turkey's official rhetoric and policies in Syria, which has had important consequences for Turkey's involvement in the war.

Turkey is host to over four million refugees, the vast majority of whom are Syrians fleeing the war.<sup>192</sup> While Turkey was initially enthusiastic to accept refugees, that compassion has been tested by the sheer number of people entering the country and the recent economic downturn.<sup>193</sup> Crowded classrooms, packed hospitals, and competition for jobs—especially in the highly unemployed south of the country—have all contributed to the decline in Turkish hospitality.<sup>194</sup> The institutional strains and the falling popularity of refugees have created political uncertainty for Erdoğan and the AKP. With local elections in March 2019, the AKP must show progress on the refugee question, especially when it comes to slowing the flow of refugees into Turkey. Turkey has involved itself in Syria in an attempt to reduce the violence that has driven so many Syrians out of the country.

Finally, Turkey views the major civil conflict to its south as an opportunity to flex its muscles on the regional stage. After a long period of absence from Middle East politics, Turkey wants to show that it is strong enough to press for its own interests in the region. President Erdoğan routinely positions Turkey as the protector of the *umma*, or Islamic community through passionate speeches and mosque-building projects across the Middle East and the globe.<sup>195</sup> <sup>196</sup> On the regional, political front, Erdoğan has recently criticized the Treaty of Lausanne, which established Turkey's modern-day borders, and the Turkish government has released maps featuring an enlarged Turkey.<sup>197</sup> While talk of Erdoğan becoming an Ottoman-style *caliph* is vastly overstated, the Turkish government clearly does desire to reclaim some of its long-lost influence over the region, through military and diplomatic means. The expansion of Turkish influence in the region is an important Turkish interest that is viewed with great suspicion in the United States.

It must also be noted that in addition to its own interests in the conflict, Turkey was under significant international pressure to help combat the Islamic State. Between 2013 and 2015, it was widely known that large numbers of would-be ISIL militants were entering Syria and Iraq through Turkey to join the jihadist group. In 2013, some 30,000 militants crossed through Turkey on what became known as the "jihadi highway."<sup>198</sup> Turkey's reluctance to take action to stop this traffic, along with reports that the

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<sup>192</sup> Selcan Hacaoglu, "A Flood of Refugees Tests Turkey's Tolerance," *Bloomberg*, December 12, 2018.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> Hannah Lucinda Smith, "I am Your Protector, Erdoğan tells Europe's Muslims," *The Times*, May 21, 2018.

<sup>196</sup> Gonul Tol, "Turkey's Bid for Religious Leadership: How the AKP Uses Islamic Soft Power," *Foreign Affairs*, January 10, 2019.

<sup>197</sup> Nick Danforth, "Turkey's New Maps Are Reclaiming the Ottoman Empire," *Foreign Policy*, October 23, 2016.

<sup>198</sup> Ahmet Yayla and Colin Clarke, "Turkey's Double ISIS Standard," *Foreign Policy*, April 12, 2018.

government was actually assisting the jihadists—including, but not limited to, the 2014 MIT trucks scandal—earned repeated criticism from the international community, which was increasingly viewing ISIL as the most important terrorist threat in the world. Following the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, perpetrated by ISIL, the Obama administration called on Turkey to secure its southern border in order to stop the flow of terrorists in and out of Syria.<sup>199</sup> <sup>200</sup> This rebuke coincided with a stronger statement from Russia, which accused Turkey of assisting ISIL and al-Qaeda.<sup>201</sup> Turkey-Russia relations at the time were strained over the November 24th, 2015 SU-24 incident, in which Turkey shot down a Russian aircraft, but the message from the international community was clear: Turkey must take a harder line against ISIL.<sup>202</sup>

### **Turkey's War**

Turkey's actions in the Syrian Civil War are indicative of the divergence between American and Turkish interests. More importantly, the two countries have both pursued separate Syria policies that have served to damage the bilateral relationship further. A brief discussion of the initial attempt at cooperation between the two countries is useful for understanding how Syria has become such a difficult problem in the U.S.-Turkey relationship.

In 2014, the United States launched its “Train and Equip” program to assist moderate Syrian Arab rebels in the fight against the Islamic State.<sup>203</sup> The program, largely based in Turkey, was completely unsuccessful.<sup>204</sup> After a series of setbacks, the program was cancelled less than two years after its inception. The Obama administration, still needing effective forces to combat the Islamic State and still unwilling to use American troops, turned increasingly to the Kurdish fighters in Syria's northeast. The United States decided to jeopardize its relations with Turkey for the sake of defeating the Islamic State. Meanwhile, the Turkish government, growing disillusioned with the United States, began to plan for its own series of military interventions in Syria. In the “Train and Equip affair”, the difference between American and Turkish interests is clearly revealed. Additionally, the choices each country made in this brief period have drastically impacted the military situation in Syria as well as the U.S.-Turkey relationship.

Following the rejection by the United States and Russia of its 2015 proposal to create a buffer area and “no-fly” zone in northern Syria, the Turkish government had to rethink its approach to the

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<sup>199</sup> Humeyra Pamuk and Nick Tattersall, “Turkish Intelligence Helped Ship Arms to Syrian Islamist Rebel Areas,” *Reuters*, May 21, 2015.

<sup>200</sup> Patrick Cockburn, “War With ISIS: Obama Demands Turkey Close Stretch of Border with Syria,” *The Independent*, November 29, 2015.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> BBC, “Turkey Downing of Russia Jet ‘Stab in the Back’ – Putin,” November 24, 2015.

<sup>203</sup> Ian Black, “US Axes \$500m scheme to Train Syrian Rebels, says NYT,” *The Guardian*, October 9, 2015.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

conflict. While the Turkish military had been carrying out air strikes and artillery actions against the Islamic State and Kurdish targets in Syria since 2015, these were proving insufficient to satisfy Turkey's goals of keeping ISIL off its border and stopping the advance of the YPG.<sup>205</sup> <sup>206</sup> Particularly troubling was the possibility of YPG forces taking the area around the city of al-Bab from ISIL and connecting its Afrin "canton" to its main territory. On August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016, following the capture of Manbij by Kurdish forces, the SDF announced plans to liberate al-Bab from ISIL.<sup>207</sup> To prevent this outcome and to advance its own goals, the Turkish government launched "Operation Euphrates Shield" on August 24, 2016. The operation essentially sought to seize the ISIL-held territory before the Kurds and install forces in the area that the Kurds could not attack, for both military and political reasons.<sup>208</sup> Militarily, the YPG could not hope to win against the superior Turkish numbers in the area, and politically, the YPG's US-backed mission is to fight ISIL, not the Turkish forces; offensive actions by the YPG against Turkish forces would be displeasing to Washington. By late March 2017, al-Bab was in the hands of Turkish-aligned rebels and the YPG's territorial ambitions had been frustrated.<sup>209</sup> The successful occupation of ISIL-held territory in northern Syria marked Turkey's first direct involvement in Syria's civil war and set the stage for its subsequent actions. While the United States might have been pleased that Turkey was taking a proactive stance against the Islamic State, the implications of Turkey's entrance into Syria were unambiguous: Turkey was prepared to achieve its own goals in Syria regardless of the United States. For its part, the United States made no real attempt to stop the Turkish army.

In January 2018, Turkey launched "Operation Olive Branch" against YPG forces in northwest Syria. Isolated after the success of Operation Euphrates Shield, the YPG fighters in the territory around Afrin came under attack from Turkish and Turkey-aligned rebel groups on January 20.<sup>210</sup> In a show of confidence, Erdoğan announced on January 24 that after capturing Afrin, the operation would continue with an assault on Manbij—the YPG's most important enclave on the left bank of the Euphrates. Despite stiff resistance and some assistance from the Syrian government, Afrin and the surrounding areas were in Turkey's hands after about two months.<sup>211</sup> Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, in an article for *Foreign Policy*, wrote that the Afrin operation was intended to "[defend] against a build-up of

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<sup>205</sup> Ceylan Yeginsu, "Turkey, Anticipating Attack, Strikes 3 ISIS Targets in Syria With Jets," *New York Times*, July 24, 2015.

<sup>206</sup> BBC, "Turkey Confirms Shelling Kurdish Fighters in Syria," October 27, 2015.

<sup>207</sup> Rudaw, "Military Council Created for Liberation of al-Bab," August 14, 2016.

<sup>208</sup> BBC, "Turkey 'ends' Euphrates Shield Campaign in Syria," March 30, 2017.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> BBC, "Syria: Turkish Ground Troops Enter Afrin Enclave," January 21, 2018.

<sup>211</sup> Tuvan Gumrukcu and Tom Perry, "Erdoğan Says to Extend Syria Operation Despite Risk of U.S. Confrontation," *Reuters*, January 24, 2018.

terrorists [on our border].”<sup>212</sup> Çavuşoğlu’s vagueness about which terrorists he is referring to is in some ways the whole point of the editorial: to justify Turkey’s campaign against the YPG, the Turkish government equates the YPG with U.S. enemies such as al-Qaeda-aligned groups in Idlib and the Islamic State remnants in northern Syria.

In early September of 2018, the Syrian government (with significant assistance from Russia), stepped up attacks against mostly Salafist al-Qaeda aligned rebel groups; most prominently Hay’et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), in Idlib governorate, which borders Turkey.<sup>213</sup> This raised serious concerns around the globe about the humanitarian crisis that a major government offensive in Idlib would create.<sup>214</sup> Erdoğan was among the loudest voices calling for the creation of a de-escalation zone in Idlib as an alternative to a major government offensive.<sup>215</sup> A renewed humanitarian crisis on the Turkish border would have caused yet another massive refugee flow into Turkey, which already hosted millions of Syrian refugees at that point.<sup>216</sup> Since the prevention of additional refugee flows into Turkey is a major priority for the Turkish government, Erdoğan’s warnings made sense. The Turkish and Russian presidents eventually met in Sochi and agreed to create “a demilitarized buffer zone 15-25 km into opposition-held territories.”<sup>217</sup> As part of the agreement, Turkey was allowed to establish a number of military observation posts around Idlib, including four just south of the formerly YPG-held area around Afrin, which still has a significant YPG-led insurgency. Here a pattern in Turkish behavior begins to emerge. In order to advance its primary—but internationally unpopular—goal of defeating the YPG in Syria, the Turkish government frequently uses terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and Hay’et Tahrir al-Sham to justify military action, and the plight of Syrian refugees to justify its control over large areas of Syrian territory.

As with the Idlib situation discussed above, Turkey has in the past few years preferred to deal with Russia and Iran when addressing problems in the Syrian Civil War, since those states have significantly more influence over the situation than Syria’s government. This has also been effective with the 2018 Sochi Agreement, the December 2018 agreement to coordinate in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal announcement, and the Astana talks.<sup>218</sup> However, Turkey’s mission to eradicate terrorist groups (including YPG) in Syria is incompatible with the YPG’s tacit alignment with Damascus.<sup>219</sup> Turkey’s stance on the

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<sup>212</sup> Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, “The Meaning of Operation Olive Branch,” *Foreign Policy*, April 5, 2018.

<sup>213</sup> Al Jazeera, “Erdoğan and UN Warn of Human Catastrophe in Idlib”, September 11, 2018.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “The World Must Stop Assad”, *Wall Street Journal*, September 10, 2018.

<sup>216</sup> Erin Cunningham and Zakaria Zakaria, “Turkey, once a Haven for Syrian Refugees, Grows Weary of their Presence”, *The Washington Post*, Apr 10, 2018.

<sup>217</sup> Mariya Petkova, “After the Sochi Agreement, HTS is Facing Internal Divisions”, *Al Jazeera*, September 27, 2018.

<sup>218</sup> Al Jazeera, “Russia, Turkey to Coordinate on Syria: Foreign Ministers,” December 29, 2018.

<sup>219</sup> The Economist, “Assad on the Offensive”, February 13, 2016.

Assad regime has been mercurial. As recently as November of 2016, Erdoğan was calling for Assad to be deposed.<sup>220</sup> Although he withdrew the statement just days later, Erdoğan's ambiguous stance on Assad's future remains a problem for Turkey's relations with the regime and its allies. Non-alignment on critical issues concerning Syria's future exacerbates the chaos in the country and makes a political solution impossible.

The future of Manbij is the most important outstanding military question in the Syrian War today. The city, which has been held by YPG forces since they captured it from ISIL on August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016, has been a target for Ankara since virtually the beginning of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>221</sup> While the Turkish army did not follow up on Erdoğan's threat to attack Manbij immediately after securing the area around Afrin, they have been amassing troops near Manbij since last year, and Erdoğan told Donald Trump that Turkey was ready to capture the city on December 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018, following Trump's withdrawal announcement.<sup>222</sup> In response to these threats, the YPG invited Syrian government forces to the city to deter a Turkish assault.<sup>223</sup> Diplomatic progress on the Manbij question continues to move at a glacial pace, with Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu declaring on February 6th, 2019 that progress is continuing, despite American foot-dragging.<sup>224</sup> While the situation is far from certain, Turkey appears close to achieving its longstanding goal of pushing all YPG forces to the right bank of the Euphrates without a costly and politically complicated military assault on Manbij. For the moment, Turkey seems willing to wait for a diplomatic solution in Manbij, given the unique circumstances of the town, but if the talks break down there could be renewed military action. Significantly, the United States is negotiating with Turkey almost as if it is an adversary in the Syrian conflict. Competition in Syria has won out over cooperation for the two former partners.

## **Conclusion**

After a period of indecision and minimal action (2011-2015) followed by a period of enthusiastic engagement in the Syrian Civil War (2016-present), Turkey stands as a major player in Syria, pursuing a course that is not aligned with that of any other actor in the conflict. It occupies a large amount of territory in Syria's northwest and claims to be at war with the YPG, creating significant disagreement with both Russia and the United States. Turkey's ambiguous relationship with Bashar al-Assad's regime in Damascus makes the situation more uncertain. Continuous Turkish saber-rattling and the exercise in Afrin has driven

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<sup>220</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, "Turkey Entered Syria to End al-Assad's Rule: President Erdoğan", November 29, 2016.

<sup>221</sup> Tuvan Gumrukcu and Tom Perry, "Erdoğan Says to Extend Syria Operation Despite Risk of U.S. Confrontation," *Reuters*, January 24, 2018.

<sup>222</sup> Al Jazeera, "Turkey ready to take over Syria's Manbij, Erdoğan tells Trump", January 21, 2019.

<sup>223</sup> Bethan McKernan, "Syrian Troops Mass at Edge of Kurdish Town Threatened by Turkey," *The Guardian*, December 28, 2018.

<sup>224</sup> Al Jazeera, "Turkey's Çavuşoğlu Says Work on Manbij Plan Has Sped Up," February 6, 2019.

the YPG closer to the Syrian government. Turkey has begun resettling Syrian refugees in its captured territory. The pacification of more and more Syrian territory also satisfies the Turkish goal of reducing migrant flows out of Syria, but at the cost of American interests in the country. To complicate matters further, U.S. President Donald Trump announced on December 19th that the United States was withdrawing from the conflict, prompting the resignation of his defense secretary, James Mattis.<sup>225</sup>

Turkey's military operations in northern Syria have allowed it to occupy a vast range of Syrian territory it is now calling a "safe zone". The Turkish-occupied territory in northern Syria is significant because it provides a base from which Turkey can continue fighting the YPG insurgency in the conquered territory while also resettling refugees in the area. Every refugee resettled in Syria is a political victory for Turkish government, and since they cannot be returned to areas controlled by the Assad regime, or to war zones, the conquered Syrian territory is the only space available. The need to make its "safe zones" safe also allows Turkey and its allies to continue to root out the Kurdish insurgency, particularly around Afrin, that continues to resist Turkish dominance in the region.<sup>226</sup> The future status of this zone is unknown. Defeating the Islamic State was just one of Turkey's many interests in the war, and not its most important one either. If they only help defeat ISIL, Turkey will look like a proxy for the United States and Russia, when it wants to be recognized as an important independent force.

President Donald Trump's order to withdraw from Syria further complicates the current situation.<sup>227</sup> Without security guarantees from the U.S. presence in YPG-held areas, the Kurdish group has become increasingly worried about its survival driving it to seek out protection from the Syrian government. The withdrawal order also indicates strongly to U.S. rivals such as Iran and Russia that the United States is not interested in the outcome of the war anymore, giving them much greater latitude to act in their own interest without having to worry about the American response. The Turkish government, for its part, seemed delighted to hear of the U.S. withdrawal, claiming it could easily handle the terrorist remnants in the country on its own, but was then livid when U.S. withdrawal became contingent on security guarantees for the YPG.<sup>228 229</sup>

Turkey's involvement in the Syrian Civil War should be of prime concern to U.S. policymakers. Turkey has been pursuing policies in Syria that have further destabilized an already unstable region and

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<sup>225</sup> Mark Landler et al, "Trump to Withdraw U.S. Forces From Syria, Declaring 'We Have Won Against ISIS,'" *New York Times*, December 19, 2018.

<sup>226</sup> Borzou Daraghi, "Turkey Has Made a Quagmire for Itself in Syria," *Foreign Policy*, July 23, 2018.

<sup>227</sup> Amanda Sloat, "Trump is Making the Mess in Syria even Messier," *Foreign Policy*, January 16, 2019.

<sup>228</sup> Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "Erdoğan: Trump is Right on Syria. Turkey Can Get the Job Done," *New York Times*, January 7, 2019.

<sup>229</sup> Kareem Fahim and Karen DeYoung, "Turkish Rebuke of Bolton Highlights Troubled Effort to Sell U.S. Plan for Exit from Syria," *The Washington Post*, January 8, 2019.

have worked against U.S. interests in the region. More importantly, however, Turkey's involvement in the conflict is a reflection of Turkey's newly emboldened foreign policy and national self-confidence.

## **U.S. Partners: Israel and Saudi Arabia**

*Sydney Ward*

### **Introduction**

Turkey's bid for regional influence has led the state to work with a variety of Arab states, including Qatar, to strengthen its strategic position in the region. Turkey's main goals are to design regional dynamics that better aligns with its interests. Lately, this has led to the deterioration of relations between Turkey and U.S. partners in the Middle East, namely Israel and Saudi Arabia. Although Turkey has a history of partnering with these countries, lately, the Turkish government has begun to openly oppose many of the policies and actions of Israel and Saudi Arabia. Considering these strained relationships, the U.S. faces challenges in both supporting its partners in the Middle East and rekindling its alliance with Turkey. The United States' strong relationship with its partners in the Middle East help to curtail action by Turkey against these countries. Even so, the United States should be prepared to stand by its partners in the region and criticize Turkish policies that threaten relationship between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. In accordance, the U.S. should continue to support its partners in the Middle East and encourage Turkey to maintain stability in the Middle East.

### **Israel**

Diplomatic relations between Israel and Turkey began with Turkey's recognition of Israel in 1949. This was the beginning of a rocky relationship that would be tested throughout the late 20th century and into the new millennia. During the 1990s, Syria entered a military agreement with Greece that posed a mutual threat to both Israel and Turkey, resulting in a security agreement between the two states.<sup>230</sup> The agreement between Israel and Turkey was a historic act of cooperation that laid the foundation for their relationship in the 1990s. Throughout the decade, European states were increasingly critical of Turkey's human rights record which caused difficulties for Turkey to obtain Western technology and military equipment.<sup>231</sup> In 1992, a series of high-level visits between Turkey and Israel began, later resulting in the signing of a free trade agreement in March of 1996.<sup>232</sup> Subsequently, trade between Israel and Turkey grew from \$54 million in 1987 to \$2 billion in 2001.<sup>233</sup> None of the agreements between Israel and Turkey resulted in a formal alliance, but Turkey was still met with disapproval from the rest of the Arab world because of its dynamic relationship with Israel. The Arab world viewed the agreements as only serving Israeli interests while oppressing Arab and Muslim interests in the region.

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<sup>230</sup> Özlem Tür, "Turkey and Israel in the 2000s—From Cooperation to Conflict." *Israel Studies* 17, no. 3 (2012): 45-66.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*

After rising to power in 2002, the AKP government faced important foreign policy issues in the Middle East. The 2003 Iraq War and the common threat of other regional powers such as Syria and Iran, strengthened Turkish-Israeli relations.<sup>234</sup> Nevertheless, the Second Intifada and Israel's policies towards Palestinians had a negative impact on Turkey-Israel relations. As a result of the Second Intifada and the hold on the peace process, Turkish government began to distance itself from Israel and take a more cautious approach towards Israeli policies.<sup>235</sup> As Turkey became more confident, critical statements of Israel began to emerge. Erdoğan named Israeli military operations as "state terror" and spoke out against the Israeli government.<sup>236</sup> Yet, simultaneously, during the second half of the 2000's Turkey was continually a mediator between Israel and Syria. At the end of 2008, Turkey entered the fifth round as a mediator of indirect negotiations between Syria and Israel. The Israeli Prime Minister Olmert requested to consult with his government and get approval for negotiations over the disputed Golan Heights territory on the Israeli-Syrian border. When Prime Minister Olmert returned to Israel from Turkey, almost all communication lines between Turkey and Israel were cut—according to Turkish sources. Olmert stopped returning Erdoğan's calls, failed to get back to him with an answer on the negotiated area, and within a week, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead

Operation Cast Lead was a 22-day military operation in the Gaza Strip which resulted in armed conflict between Hamas and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Turkey felt the operation was a breach of its trust and communication. Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan is reported to have been personally hurt and offended, and to have spoken of the hypocrisy of talking about peace in one place while initiating an operation "on civilians" in another."<sup>237</sup> In January 2009, at the World Economic Forum meeting, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan burst out in anger at President Shimon Peres of Israel, telling him "when it comes to killing, you know well how to kill."<sup>238</sup> Ever since, relations between Turkey and Israel have continued to decline.

The Gaza Flotilla Raid further severed relations between Israel and Turkey. On May 10, 2010, Israeli forces raided the Mavi Marmara flotilla, a Turkish NGO-owned ship, killing ten activists that were a part of the Free Gaza Movement and Turkish Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH). Nine of the victims were Turkish activists and one was a dual Turkish-American citizen. The Free Gaza Movement was carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza in an attempt to break the Israeli

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<sup>234</sup> Özlem Tür, "Turkey and Israel in the 2000s—From Cooperation to Conflict." *Israel Studies* 17, no. 3 (2012): 45-66.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Katrin Bennhold, "In Davos, Turkey's Erdoğan and Israel's Peres Clash Over Gaza", *New York Times*, January 29, 2009.

embargo of the Gaza Strip. The raid was condemned internationally and resulted in a deterioration of Israel–Turkey relations. The Gaza Flotilla Raid worsened an ongoing crisis in Israeli-Turkish relations that has damaged all levels of ties and influenced public opinion in both countries.

Since the raid, the United States has attempted to mediate a reconciliation between the two states. Turkey demanded three conditions for reconciliation: an Israeli apology, compensation for the Mavi Marmara victims, and the lifting of the blockade on Gaza. In March 2013, President Barack Obama facilitated a telephone call between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Erdoğan and joined the call while visiting Israel. During the call, Netanyahu apologized and “agreed to complete the agreement for compensation,” according to an official statement.<sup>239</sup> Both sides agreed to normalize relations and reinstate their ambassadors.<sup>240</sup> After the call, an official statement said that the United States “attache[s] great importance to the restoration of positive relations between them in order to advance regional peace and security.”<sup>241</sup> In late June 2016, Turkey and Israel formally reconciled when Israel agreed to allow Turkey to establish infrastructure projects in Gaza such as a hospital, a power station, and a desalination facility; and paying compensation.<sup>242</sup>

After the Gaza Flotilla Raid, Turkish-Israeli relations were on uneven footing and continued to have ups and downs in response to regional developments. For example, Israel and Turkey have conflicting views on Iran. Turkey has acknowledged that Iran’s potential nuclear capacity is harmful but has continued to maintain relations with Iran. Israel has expressed that military intervention has become increasingly more necessary in Iran because Israel sees a nuclear Iran as a direct threat to its own security. Turkey views Israel’s position against Iran as going against Turkish interests in the region because Turkey has political and economic trade relations with Iran which will be discussed in the following chapter. Finally, the Kurds and the Jews have a deep historical relationship that has resulted in present day Israel’s support of the Kurds as it views them as a fellow persecuted people.<sup>243</sup> In 2017, Israel supported the Kurdish referendum in Iraq. Israel’s decision to support the referendum was counter to Turkey, Syria, and Iraq’s position on the Kurds.

Diplomatic relations between Israel and Turkey were cut off following the Gaza Flotilla Raid. Despite this, between 2010 and 2016, bilateral trade increased.<sup>244</sup> Turkish exports to Israel reached \$4.3

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<sup>239</sup> Herb Keinon, “Netanyahu Apologizes to Turkey over Gaza Flotilla,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 22, 2013.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> Shira Efron. *Future of Israeli-Turkish Relations*. (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2018)

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>243</sup> David M. Halbfinger, “Israel Endorsed Kurdish Independence. Saladin Would Have Been Proud”, *Haaretz*, April 24, 2018.

<sup>244</sup> *Hürriyet Daily News*, “Turkish-Israeli Economic, Trade Ties Expected to Soar After Deal,” June 27, 2016.

billion in 2016.<sup>245</sup> Turkey is interested in continued expansion of trade, as the AKP has a strong economic agenda and Erdoğan pursues the advancement of Turkish business interests as a high priority. Therefore, the Israeli market matters.<sup>246</sup> The Turkish market is of substantial interest to Israel: with 75 million potential consumers it offers a strong market opportunity. Turkey's interest in Israel includes establishing Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZs) which are industrial parks that house manufacturing operations.<sup>247</sup> Although QIZ discussions have died down since 2016,<sup>248</sup> Turkey and Israel have continued to trade: In 2017, bilateral trade between the two states was valued at \$4.3 billion; \$2.9 billion were Turkish exports to Israel and \$1.4 billion were exports from Israel to Turkey.<sup>249</sup> Besides trade, Israel and Turkey rely on one another for shipping routes, ports, and a notable tourism industry.<sup>250</sup> In 2017, Turkey saw about 380,000 Israeli tourists—a figure which was up 30% from the previous year.<sup>251</sup> In 2017, about 40,000 Turkish tourists visited Jerusalem.<sup>252</sup>

The U.S. is closely allied with Israel and has maintained this relationship throughout the years. No matter what events and policies unfold in the Middle East, the U.S. continues to partner with Israel. The current U.S. administration has shown adamant support for Israel by moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem. This controversial decision signaled the U.S.' recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital—a point of contention between Palestinian and Israeli leadership. Additionally, the U.S. and Israel are strong trade partners. As of 2016, trade between the U.S. and Israel was valued at \$49 billion each year.<sup>253</sup> The United States' vested partnership with Israel is crucial to ensuring stability in the region and maintaining a U.S. presence in the Middle East. Therefore, the Turkish-Israeli relationship is of importance to the U.S. and continuing U.S. goals in the region. As maintaining stability in the Middle East is a top priority, the U.S. should continue to ally with Israel to ensure that Turkey does not act out against Israel.

Despite complications to their partnership, Israel and Turkey still share mutual economic interests, including trade and investments. Historically, Israel and Turkey have been able to separate their economic interests from their political and diplomatic differences. However, since 2002, Turkey has spoken against Israel's violation of international law and tensions continue to rise between Turkey and

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<sup>245</sup> Anadolu Agency, "Turkish Business People Seek Trade Boost with Israel," November 27, 2017; and Deutsche Welle, "Turkey and Israel: Animosity Ends When It Comes to Money," December 12, 2017.

<sup>246</sup> Sharon Udasin, "Turkish Industrial Leaders Call for Trade Increase with Israel," *Jerusalem Post*, May 16, 2017.

<sup>247</sup> Shira Efron. *Future of Israeli-Turkish Relations*. (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2018)

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Gallia Lindenstrauss and Berkay Gülen, "Old and New Dynamics: What has Changed in Turkey-Israel Relations?", *INSS*, May 24, 2018.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> U.S. Embassy in Israel, "Fact Sheet U.S. - Israel Economic Relationship."

Israel as Erdoğan and Netanyahu trade insults over Twitter, accusing one another of committing atrocities against humanity. The U.S. is invested in the relations between Turkey and Israel because of its goals of maintaining trade and ensuring regional security against Iran. The political deterioration of the relationship between Israel and Turkey started around 2009 with the World Economic Forum meeting, Operation Cast Lead and the Gaza Flotilla Raid. These events reflect Turkey's changing foreign policy in the Middle East. The U.S. must continue to support both of these partners in the region to ensure that the Middle East remains stable and Iranian influence is curbed.

### **Saudi Arabia**

During the Arab Spring Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East began to change, as discussed in the previous chapter. Around this time, Turkey started to gain influence in the Middle East and to establish itself as a regional power by using its Sunni identity and promoting the spread of democracy. Turkey is not the only regional power using Islam in a bid for hegemony. Saudi Arabia has also vied for regional power as a Sunni Muslim state. In contrast to the Saudi Wahhabism, Turkey is attempting brand itself and its Sunni Islam as more tolerant, accepting, and less extreme. Therefore, making Turkey more fit for regional leadership.<sup>254</sup>

During the First Gulf War, Turkey's regional policy aligned with the UN Security Council Resolution and the American position, which generated Saudi Arabian appreciation for Turkey. Later, Saudi Arabia gave \$1.2 billion to Turkey, plus another \$1 billion to a Turkish defense fund, in order to compensate for Turkey's economic loss during the First Gulf War.<sup>255</sup> Due to the domestic political instability in Turkey in the 1990s, there were ups and downs in bilateral relations. After 2002, the AKP reconstructed the Turkish government by re-examining domestic politics and foreign relations, including its relations with Muslim countries. Under the AKP government, Turkey improved its relations with Saudi Arabia in line with its "Policy of Zero Problems with Neighbors" and maximized its cooperation with countries in the region.<sup>256</sup>

When Saudi Arabia recognized Turkey growing closer to Israel in the 2000's, it chose not to marginalize Turkey from the rest of the Middle East. Saudi Arabia chose to do this because it feared that as Turkey grew closer to Israel and the West, it would grow farther apart from the Arab and Muslim countries in the Middle East.<sup>257</sup> Therefore, Saudi Arabia preferred to improve its cooperation with Turkey under Erdoğan's leadership and to pursue similar policies in the region.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Gonul Tol, "Turkey's Bid for Religious Leadership", *Foreign Affairs*. January 10, 2019.

<sup>255</sup> Muhittin Ataman, "Turkish-Saudi Arabia Relations During the Arab Uprisings: Towards a Strategic Partnership?" *Insight Turkey* 14, no. 4 (2012): 121-36.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

After 9/11, Saudi Arabia began to lose trust in Western countries and looked to Turkey for investment and economic cooperation. Saudi Arabia saw Turkey as a military power that could prevent instabilities, and balance regional threats, namely Iran. Additionally, Turkey was one of the fastest growing economies in the world.<sup>259</sup> These equally beneficially prospects resulted in Saudi Arabia and Turkey signing a treaty establishing the Turkish-Saudi Business Council in 2003. In May 2005, Turkey and Saudi Arabia extended this relationship by establishing an investment fund to encourage private and governmental investments from the Gulf countries to Turkey.<sup>260</sup> The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Turkey continued to flourish in 2008. That year, bilateral trade between Saudi Arabia and Turkey increased to more than \$5.5 billion.<sup>261</sup>

In response to the Arab Spring, Turkey and Saudi Arabia did not have the same opinion about the continuation of the status quo and the regional changes. However, both countries shared a common goal of regional stability within their surrounding region.<sup>262</sup> During the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia spent large amounts of money—in the Bahraini case, sending military troops as well—in order to keep the wave of revolts as far away from its country and to suppress the uprisings in order to maintain stability in the region.<sup>263</sup> This approach contrasted with Turkey's active role in supporting regime change. The divergence of Turkish-Saudi interests became further apparent after the fall of Mohammed Morsi in Egypt in July 2013. The Saudis and Emiratis sided with the Sisi administration and were angered by Turkish (and Qatari) patronage of the Muslim Brotherhood movement. Turkey publicly spoke out against the Saudi Arabia's support for the overthrow of a fairly elected president in Egypt, stating Saudi Arabia's support for such actions "did not uphold Islam or Sharia law."<sup>264</sup> As a result of Turkey's criticism, some Gulf countries began to cut ties with Turkey. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), suspended a \$12 billion investment in a coal-based energy project in Turkey during a time when Turkey was suffering from declining exports to Syria and Egypt.<sup>265</sup>

Several factors contribute to the declining status of Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia and UAE. These include Turkey's support to the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt and Syria, Saudi Arabia's silence towards the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, and the Jamal Khashoggi killing in 2018. Turkey's neo-

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Muhittin Ataman, "Turkish-Saudi Arabia Relations During the Arab Uprisings: Towards a Strategic Partnership?" *Insight Turkey* 14, no. 4 (2012): 121-36.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Ethan Bronner and Michael Slackman, "Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest", *The New York Times*, March 14, 2011.

<sup>264</sup> Özden Zeynep Oktav, "Quo Vadis Turkey-GCC States Relations? A Turkish Perspective", *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 2 (2018): 107-124.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

Ottoman aspirations, such as having a military presence in Qatar, can be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy in the formation of a Turkey-Russia-Iran alliance.<sup>266</sup> This alliance has resulted in Turkey distancing itself from its Gulf allies who tilt towards the U.S.

The murder of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi has brought international attention to the extremism of the Saudi regime. His assassination and dismemberment in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul has also highlighted the Turkish-Saudi rivalry. President Erdoğan's statement in the Turkish Parliament blatantly blamed the Saudi regime for Khashoggi's murder and implied that the orders were given directly by the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad bin Salman.<sup>267</sup> Turkey has grown increasingly apprehensive of Saudi Arabia in recent years as the Crown Prince has readily shown Saudi Arabia's ability to be the hegemon power in the Arab world.<sup>268</sup> Turkey's apprehension intensified when President Trump sent clear signals after his inauguration that he would make Saudi Arabia the center of the U.S. policy toward the Middle East.<sup>269</sup> The U.S. increase of interest in Saudi Arabia in the Middle East, means that from Turkey's perspective the U.S. has cast aside Turkey from its Middle East policy.<sup>270</sup> As a result of this perception, the Khashoggi killing created a door for Turkey to discredit the Saudi regime and Mohammad bin Salman and create a chasm between Saudi Arabia and the U.S.<sup>271</sup> Turkey's approach to the Khashoggi killing has given President Erdoğan a strong anti-Saudi platform and given Turkey the moral high ground in the situation.<sup>272</sup>

## Conclusion

The U.S. and Turkey have diverging interests that are increasingly apparent as Turkey's relations with U.S. partners in the Middle East weaken. Turkey's relations with Israel, while once mutually beneficial, have soured since the 2010 Gaza Flotilla Raid. Tensions heighten between Erdoğan and Netanyahu, but their external rivalry does not reflect the current economic relationship between Israel and Turkey. Turkey and Saudi Arabia continue to clash as both states try to establish themselves as regional powers. The recent Khashoggi killing only further aggravated relations between the two states as the U.S. chose to stand by the Saudi regime. Turkey's policy with the U.S. partners in the Middle East is also diverging. This divergence reflects itself in Turkey's relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia. The U.S.

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Mohammed Ayoob, "The Khashoggi Murder: How the Turkish-Saudi Rivalry Escalated Over a Premeditated Murder." *The National Interest*. October 25, 2018.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

should be aware of Turkey's changing relations with Saudi Arabia and Israel while shaping its policy in the Middle East.

## **U.S. Rivals: Russia and Iran**

*Caylyn Rich*

### **Introduction**

Analyzing Turkey's shifting foreign policy approach towards Iran and Russia is important to understanding how the US-Turkey relationship has altered. Turkey is moving in an autonomous direction, divorcing itself from its status-quo relations to foster ties with Russia and Iran. Ankara is actively increasing its engagement with Moscow and Tehran, confusing its position of partnership with Washington. The divergence within U.S.-Turkey relations is vividly revealed as Turkey plays Russia against the U.S. and manipulates U.S. policies with Iran, destabilizing and challenging American dominance. While there are real limitations to just how much Turkey can push and pull its competitors and supporters, the United States faces challenges in securing its interests in the region as Turkey commits to aligning with American antagonists, regardless of complications emerging from integrated points of conflict. The U.S. should acknowledge this new reality in which Turkey, Russia, and Iran are caravanning together down the highway of regional power without the prospect of a rest break. Policies for moving forward given this diagnosis will be discussed later.

### **Turkey and Russia**

#### *Background*

Before Turkey became the Republic of Turkey, the Bolshevik regime helped fund the independence movement and provided a loan of eight million dollars to alleviate old Ottoman expenses.<sup>273</sup> The Montreux Convention of 1936 reallocated Turkish activity in the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits (succeeding the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne to demilitarize the straits) thwarting Russian aggression in its goals to reach the Mediterranean.<sup>274</sup> The Soviet Union's expansion into Turkish zones contributed in pushing Turkey closer to NATO, as mentioned in previous chapters. Despite a cooperation agreement signed in 1967, Turkey and the Soviet Union maintained minimal relations throughout the Cold War. Following the collapse of the U.S.S.R. and subsequent processes of 'opening up' since the 1990's, the Turkish-Russian allegiance has grown. The inspiration to strengthen ties stemmed from the need to manage these respective countries within the context of post-Soviet nation building, a ravaging Global War on Terror (GWOT), technological advances, and political turnover in neighboring countries. Officially, following the September 11 terrorist attacks, Turkey and Russia signed an Action Plan on November 16,

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<sup>273</sup> Nigyar Masumova, "Russia and Turkey: Resetting Economic Partnership," *Perceptions* 23, no.2 (2018): 33-50.

<sup>274</sup> Horia Ciuritin, "A Delicate Sense of (Economic) Balance: Turkey, Russia and the Other Strategic Map," *New Strategy Center Policy Brief*, February 15, 2018.

2001, agreeing to increase trade and combat terrorism in the Middle East. Vladimir Putin's visit to Turkey in 2004, the first presidential visit in 32 years, made particularly evident an unprecedented message of commitment and alliance between the two countries. It was a watershed year as the Turkish Prime Minister at the time, Abdullah Gül, also visited Russia. Ultimately, while Turkey and Russia have befallen obstacles including the shooting down of a Russian pilot by Turkish forces, which will be addressed later in this chapter, the two states resolved to cultivate their relationship to ensure mutual backing from a strong partner during an ongoing period of doubt and uncertainty.

### *Trade*

Turkey and Russia are better off working through, rather than against, each other.<sup>275</sup> Both are members of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), a multilateral organization established in 1992 and dedicated to promoting economic cooperation between member states. Turkey's economy has risen significantly over the past two decades and Russia has been key in increasing trade outlets.<sup>276</sup> Turkey exports large quantities of food stuffs, especially tomatoes and citruses, as well as accessories and vehicle parts. Yet, Turkey imports more goods and services from Russia including oil, steel, grain, metals and minerals. Russia's exports to Turkey account for more than half of total Russian exports.<sup>277</sup> This results in a trade deficit as Turkey imports more than it exports. To combat this discrepancy the High-Level Russian-Turkish Cooperation Council was established in 2009. It puts forth an institutionalized framework to balance the success of bilateral negotiations for both parties.<sup>278</sup> On a similar vein, tourism is a significant industry in Turkish-Russian relations, and in 2011, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Russian President Putin initiated a visa waiver program enabling Turkish citizens to visit Russia for 30 days without a visa, and vice versa.<sup>279</sup> This encouraged travel and connected the countries through cultural exchange.

### *Energy*

Turkey is energy-dependent, sourcing most of its total energy supply from imports. Turkey imports more than 30% of its natural gas harnessed from Russia<sup>280</sup> through the South Caucasus and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and the Blue Stream pipelines crossing the Black Sea. The current TurkStream project is designed to move Russia's natural gas to Europe via Turkey to avoid passing through Ukraine.

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<sup>275</sup> Horia Ciuritin, "A Delicate Sense of (Economic) Balance: Turkey, Russia and the Other Strategic Map," *New Strategy Center Policy Brief*, February 15, 2018.

<sup>276</sup> Nigyar Masumova.

<sup>277</sup> Cemre Pekcan, "Main Lines of Turkey-Russia Relations in the 2000s" in *Contemporary Russo-Turkish Relations: From Crisis to Cooperation*. (Ali Askerov (ed.), Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2018)

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>280</sup> Nigyar Masumova.

Once completed, TurkStream will meet all of Turkey's domestic natural gas needs.<sup>281</sup> It is worth noting that this project continued uninterrupted throughout the duration of sanctions addressed later in this chapter. Additionally, the Akkuyu nuclear power plant construction in Turkey is financed by the Russian state company Rosatom and is set to be finished in 2022. With a 4 reactor-plan layout, this would source 10-20% of Turkey's energy needs.<sup>282</sup> Russia benefits from this by developing its nuclear scientific-technical capabilities. From the Russian perspective Turkey offers a testing ground for Russia's Build-Own-Operate (BOO) model.<sup>283</sup> According to the BOO agreement, Rosatom will cover finances and insurance, engineering, maintenance and decommissioning when the plant dies while Turkey will manage the transmission grid and a power purchase agreement (PPA) for 50% of the electricity.<sup>284</sup> If the nuclear plant materializes as planned it will more directly link Turkey to Russia.

### *Investment*

In statement 40.d. in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, Putin approved cooperation to "provide governmental support to Russian organizations seeking to tap new markets and gain a larger foothold in traditional ones, while countering discrimination against Russian investors and exporters."<sup>285</sup> Turkey's Minister of Economy Nihat Zeybekci and Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak signed a joint economic commission protocol in the fall of 2016 and conveyed optimism for a future Free Trade Agreement (FTA) set for 2017.<sup>286</sup> This FTA was never actually enacted, however in 2017, the two countries successfully signed a memorandum to establish a joint investment fund to increase foreign direct investment (FDI) and aid construction projects. The memorandum commitment requires both groups to each invest 500 million dollars' worth of funds. The head of Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), Kirill Dmitriev claims this will intensify mutual and political cooperation vis-a-vis economic ties.<sup>287</sup> On the one hand, Turkish contractors and the overall economy benefit from pursuing commission projects with Russia. Yet, on the other hand, this makes the Turkish economy even more vulnerable to Russian influence. As of pre-sanctions 2015, Turkish firms already accounted for one quarter of all FDI in the Tatar region of Russia.<sup>288</sup> Most production facilities held sites in Tatarstan and Turkish investments in Russia totaled over \$10 billion.<sup>289</sup> Similarly, Turkish contractors are deeply involved in Russian affairs: The Turkey

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<sup>281</sup> Nigyar Masumova.

<sup>282</sup> Cemre Pekcan.

<sup>283</sup> Fatih Thompson, "The Rise of Rosatom & Russia's Nuclear Revival", (Master's Thesis, University of Washington, 2018)

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> Ministry of Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (Approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016)."

<sup>286</sup> Daily Sabah, "Turkey, Russia Aim to Complete Free Trade Agreement in 2017", October 12, 2016.

<sup>287</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, "Russia-Turkey Investment Fund 'to Enhance Bilateral Ties'", April 22, 2018.

<sup>288</sup> Maxim Edwards, "Four Points from Putin's Press Conference", *OpenDemocracy*, December 19, 2015.

<sup>289</sup> Türkrus, "Türkiye'nin Rusya'daki yatırım üssü Tataristan [Turkey's investment hub in Russia is Tatarstan]".

Union of Contractors (TMB) has completed almost 2,000 construction projects in Russia with a total net-worth of over \$62 billion since 1988.<sup>290</sup> Turkish contractors were hit hard by the 2015 Russian sanctions and relieved once the sanctions were lifted.

### *Security*

Russia's sale of the S-400 missile system to Turkey spurred pushback from NATO and the U.S. on the grounds that this infringed upon international accords because it did not comply with responsible weapons' building. The missile system is equipped with 8 launchers and 32 missiles that could target warplanes including the American F-35 fighter.<sup>291</sup> The contract is merited at a deal worth \$2.5 billion and is expected to occur in 2020. Ankara insists that it is a well-founded security measure and has issued that it will not pursue further weapons system deals with Washington on any stipulation of annulling the S-400 purchase.<sup>292</sup> Russia appears to be acting deliberately to wean Turkey away from NATO and undermine the unity of NATO by getting closer to Turkey through weapon sales and other geostrategic advances including presence in the Black Sea via Crimea.

Despite reinvigorated cooperation, crucial points of conflict remain. The annexation of Crimea granted Russia a stronghold in the northern part of the Black Sea.<sup>293</sup> More noticeably, Russia's encroaching involvement in the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 over Ossetia, the struggle in Cyprus, and Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014 were all seen by Turkey as antagonistic acts which the Turkish government has denounced. Crimea was once part of the Ottoman Empire and home to a large Muslim population. Many Muslims were exiled through the annexation developments, and the Tatar population, which maintains Turkish connections, remains a marginalized group. Erdoğan has expressed support for the territorial integrity of these communities in Ukraine. However, he tends to opt for a subdued stance on the Russian-Ukrainian dispute, only mentioning his official position when absolutely necessary.<sup>294</sup> In this way, Erdoğan asserts his rhetorical claims without retrenching Russian relations.

In November 2015, Turkish forces shot down a Russian jet pilot which they argued was flying in unpermitted Syrian air space, violating Turkish territory. Russia retaliated by enforcing sanctions on Turkish goods, suspending the visa agreement and halting most of its elaborate energy projects. At least 15% of Turkish exports were affected by these sanctions.<sup>295</sup> Russia also placed tighter regulations on

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<sup>290</sup> Sözcü, "Rus Büyükelçi: Türk Mühendislerini Rusya'da Dört Gözle Bekliyoruz [Russian Ambassador: We Look Forward to Work with Turkish Contractors in Russia]", September 30, 2016.

<sup>291</sup> Amanda Macias, "Turkey Begins Constructing Site for Russian Missile System," *CNBC*, September 6, 2018.

<sup>292</sup> Daily Sabah, "US Delegation, Turkish Officials Discuss Compatibility of S-400 Systems, F-35 Jets," February 15, 2019.

<sup>293</sup> Fatma Kelkitli. *Turkish-Russian Relations: Competition and Cooperation in Eurasia*. (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2017).

<sup>294</sup> Semih Idiz, "Turkey's Complex Balancing Act between Russia and Ukraine," *Al-Monitor*, December 5, 2018.

<sup>295</sup> Nigyar Masumova.

Turkish vehicles coming through the Black Sea zone.<sup>296</sup> These actions negatively impacted economic sectors such as investment and tourism. In winter of 2016, Erdoğan expressed his condolences to the family of the deceased pilot and shortly thereafter Russia began lifting the sanctions.

Then in July of 2016 the coup unraveled, shaking the Turkish national and international political schema. In the aftermath of the coup, Putin was the first president to publicly acknowledge Erdoğan's right to rule. The two-fold acknowledgement of Russian grievances and Putin's display of support to bolster the legitimacy of Erdoğan's authority allowed relations to normalize. This re-motivated partnership endured despite the assassination of a Russian ambassador to Turkey in December 2016.<sup>297</sup> The number of Russian visitors to Turkey was rising again by 2017.

### *Discussion*

Turkey and Russia appear to have foregone mutual criticism in exchange for cooperation. When discussing Ukraine, Turkey has shown its passiveness regarding forsaking ideological discourse (such as that of territorial integrity) to maintain positive ties with Russia. When Turkey opted to build the Blue Stream pipeline through the Black Sea rather than through Turkmenistan, Turkey actively chose to favor Russia even though pursuing this project would increase energy dependence and draw Turkish pursuits away from Central Asia.<sup>298</sup> While Erdoğan might rhetorically align himself with the West, as in the case of Crimea and other incidents, he keeps looking the other way when Russia fumbles because he has bigger fish to fry, like keeping his country running. Turkey endures a sort of "gilded cage" alliance with Russia due to interdependence in various avenues.<sup>299</sup> Turkey is highly dependent on Russia for maintaining its energy capitals and stimulating its economy. Turkey's advantageous location provides Russia with alternative routes of energy transportation.

Putin and Erdoğan are both strong leaders with authoritarian tendencies, but they are inclined to recognize palpable advantages in supporting one another. By communicating mutual transparent praise, Putin and Erdoğan can strategically use one another to legitimate their authority and influence in the region. While ostensibly complicit, Turkey is by no means just a pawn in Russia's games, but rather a conscious agent taking part in Russian schemes to its own advantages.

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<sup>296</sup> Cemre Pekcan, p.30.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Horia Ciuritin, p.10.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid, p.15.

## Turkey and Iran

### *Background*

The Iranian foreign policy has been aimed at counteracting “American domination in the Muslim world” since it rose out of the 1979 Revolution that dethroned the American-backed Shah.<sup>300</sup> Since this period in the late 1970s, the narrative of Turkey’s relationship with Iran was by proxy, unstable. Yet, with the rise of the AKP, relations have begun to normalize. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 pushed Turkey and Iran closer because they both desired stability and territorial integrity for the Middle East.<sup>301</sup> Iran and Turkey perceived that the U.S.’ actions had violated rights of sovereignty and thus, were received poorly by both governments. Nonetheless, similar to the history of relations with the Russian Empire, there is longstanding conflict resulting from intrinsic hostility between the Ottomans and the Safavid dynasty. In more recent description, an element of popular Iranian sentiment describes Erdoğan and the AKP to be distilling phony Islamic ideology to lessen the force of the Islamic Republic.<sup>302</sup> Iran is a Shia-majority state while Turkey is Sunni-majority, as was described in the previous chapters. While overshadowed by more pressing concerns, this sectarian divide should not be overlooked. Perhaps religion has not consciously informed policy vis a vis both camps, but regional divisions are inextricably linked to sectarianism.<sup>303</sup> More on this topic will be addressed later in this chapter when discussing the Arab Spring and Syria. Overall, Turkey and Iran began to improve their bilateral relations and the advent of the then-Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s visit to Turkey in August 2008 was an explicit symbol of rapport.<sup>304</sup> In line with the Russian President Putin, the current Iranian President Hassan Rouhani offered immediate recognition to Erdoğan following the coup.

### *Trade*

Turkish-Iranian trade is diversified and long-term. Turkey relies on Iran to serve oil and gas needs. Turkey and Iran already operate within a few multilateral institutions including the Islamic D-8 and The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The history of economic relations originates from the time of the Iran-Iraq War wherein Turkey was the only outlet for Iran and Iraq’s gas and oil supplies.<sup>305</sup> Once Iran began to distinguish itself as one of the most energy-lucrative countries in the world, Turkey wanted in

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<sup>300</sup> Stephen Larrabee and Alireza Nader. *Turkish-Iranian Relations in a Changing Middle East*. (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), p. 6.

<sup>301</sup> Mehran Kamrava. *The Great Game in West Asia: Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus*. (London: Oxford University Press. 2017), p. 76.

<sup>302</sup> Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry, “Iran and Turkey: Not quite Enemies but Less than Friends,” *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 4, (2017): 980-995.

<sup>303</sup> Marianna Charountaki. *Iran and Turkey: International and Regional Engagement in the Middle East* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2018).

<sup>304</sup> Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry, p.982.

<sup>305</sup> Roland Brown, “Siamese Rivals: Iran and Turkey,” *Iran Wire*, June 9, 2014.

on the wealth. The Eastern Anatolian natural gas line was constructed and started operations as early as 2001; at nearly 1500 km in length it runs from Doğubayazıt to Ankara.<sup>306</sup> On the whole, Europe is supportive of an Ankara-Tehran energy partnership because it tackles energy security concerns by expanding and ensuring European access to oil and gas suppliers.<sup>307</sup>

### *Sanctions*

After Washington imposed sanctions on Iran in 2013, Ankara facilitated gold sales to Tehran to circumvent the sanctions. This loophole was possible because Iran maintained energy sales to Turkey via a currency exchange (gas bought in Turkish lira), which was then transferred to the Turkish Halkbank accounts and sold as foreign currency.<sup>308</sup> This allowed Iran to skirt Western sanctions. Iran's participation in this recent money laundering scandal has further complicated relations. Arrested and tried in the U.S., co-defendant Reza Zarrab pleaded guilty to the scandal, but the deputy manager of the Turkish bank Halkbank, Mehmet Atilla, was convicted in January of 2018 for corruption dealing to evade sanctions against Iran.<sup>309</sup> Halkbank is a national Turkish bank and Erdoğan has condemned the sentencing, interpreting it as an attack on the Turkish government. Ankara discredited the evidence and although Erdoğan was not charged, the trial held grave potential to be "politically damaging."<sup>310</sup>

More recently, the U.S. withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal with Iran on May 8, 2018, becoming the first and only country to leave the multilateral deal. The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) proceeded to sanction Iranian personal, banking, shipping and aviation sectors on November 5, 2018 in an aim to "negotiate a comprehensive deal that will permanently prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, cease Iran's development of ballistic missiles, and end Iran's broad range of malign activities."<sup>311</sup> Washington is striving to reduce Iran's petroleum exports to zero by blacklisting Iranian businesses and seizing its financial assets.<sup>312</sup> However, the Trump administration allowed certain exceptions on Iranian oil exports under the bombast that it would upset world markets if the U.S. implemented sanctions immediately or too harshly.

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<sup>306</sup> Republic of Turkey Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, "Natural Gas Pipelines and Projects"

<sup>307</sup> Gawdat Bahgat, "Iran-Turkey Energy Cooperation: Strategic Implications," *Middle East Policy Council* 21, no.4 (Winter 2014): 121-132.

<sup>308</sup> Jonathan Schanzer, "How Iran Benefits from an Illicit Gold Trade With Turkey," *The Atlantic*, May 17, 2013.

<sup>309</sup> Benjamin Weiser and Carlotta Gall, "Banker From Turkey is Convicted in U.S. Over Plot to Avoid Sanctions," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2018.

<sup>310</sup> Amanda Sloat, "Why Turkey cares about the trial of Reza Zarrab," *Brookings Institution*, November 22, 2017.

<sup>311</sup> U.S. Department of Treasury, "U.S. Government Fully Re-Imposes Sanctions on the Iranian Regime as Part of Unprecedented U.S. Economic Pressure Campaign," November 5, 2018. (The Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) fully re-imposed all U.S. sanctions which were lifted or waived through the JCPOA agreement. The US targeted these industries and added over 250 people to the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons (SDN) list).

<sup>312</sup> Rick Gladstone, "Iran Sanctions Explained: U.S. Goals, and the View from Tehran," *The New York Times*, November 5, 2018.

Indeed, European governments were angered by Washington's self-directed moves. Thus, in early November of 2018 the U.S. announced eight countries which would have permission to continue purchasing Iranian oil for the next 180 days.<sup>313</sup> Rouhani retaliated against Washington by saying his country would not bend to "the language of force, pressure and threats," and vowed to break the sanctions.<sup>314</sup> In the wake of a nuclear deal breakup, Turkey refused to recognize the unilateral sanctions of the United States and instead promised to maintain and even increase bilateral trade ties with Iran.<sup>315</sup> This is not the first-time Turkey has favored Tehran in terms of nuclear dispute; Turkey had earlier criticized American sanctions against Iran in 2009 because it was perceived as a burden on Turkish economic development.<sup>316</sup> Erdoğan attested that Turkey had not and did not intend to join the sanctions down the line.<sup>317</sup>

### *Discussion and Security*

While the Trump administration has acted belligerently towards Iran, if anything, this situation highlights Turkish disregard for American strategy, as Turkey favors the subsequent gains to be made from pursuing bilateralism with Iran. U.S. sanctions did not stop Turkey from engaging with Iran. Alternatively, both states agreed to maintain their relationship which hovers critically around energy and trade. Iran and Turkey are deeply integrated through energy, making it likely that their partnership will continue to develop in the years to come. The overall warming of ties and commitment to sustain trade and engage in peaceful diplomacy appears to be prevailing. However, the Turkish-Iranian relationship is far from seamlessly rosy and a certain level of tension will almost inevitably persist given the comprehensive and varied history of domestic and regional concerns complicating ties between the two countries.<sup>318</sup> Vying for power through religious discourse is a tactical feature employed by both countries, as can be seen in the current civil war in Yemen.

Iran, with its fierce religious links, has been the historic face of compassion for the oppressed masses. The development of the Arab Spring and subsequent Syrian Civil War pushed Iran to take on a new position made visible in its negotiations with Turkey. The Arab Spring stipulated a power vacuum wherein both Turkey and Iran sought to enhance their position in the region. The subsequent focus on Syria escalated tensions. Mitigating conflict in Syria and addressing Kurdish nationalism poses the greatest

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<sup>313</sup> Abdul Kerimkhanov, "U.S. anti-Iran sanctions as factor of rapprochement between Iran, Turkey," *Azer News*, December 21, 2018

<sup>314</sup> Rick Gladstone, "Iran Sanctions Explained: U.S. Goals, and the View from Tehran," *The New York Times*, November 5, 2018.

<sup>315</sup> Saeid Jafari, "Why Turkey Will Protect Trade with Iran from US Sanctions," *Al-Monitor*, December 4, 2018.

<sup>316</sup> Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry.

<sup>317</sup> Abdul Kerimkhanov.

<sup>318</sup> Bülent Aras, "Turkey and Iran discussing the future under the impact of the Arab Spring," *Al Jazeera*, May 5, 2013.

security threat to the bonds linking Turkey and Iran together; this critical point of contention will be focused on in the following section.

## **Syria**

### *Turkey and Russia*

Russia has taken an increasingly involved and paramount role in ending the conflict in Syria.<sup>319</sup> This, and other, upcoming points are elaborated on in the chapter on Syria. At a recent summit meeting in February of 2019, it became publicly clear that Moscow believes the best joint solution in Syria is for Ankara to work with Damascus.<sup>320</sup> Taking the 2010 Joint Cooperation Against Terror and Terror Organizations Agreement one step further, Russia has proposed applying the 1998 Adana Accord, which brought together Syria and Turkey in an aim to combat terrorism, to ease tensions in Northwest Syria. Turkey does not want Syria to host the PKK's leader Öcalan or recognize any PKK affiliations in the Syrian territory. Despite Turkey's hesitancy to pursue this project due to fear of how a deal might empower Kurdish abilities, Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu insists that Russia's recognition of Turkey's right to intervene is positive.<sup>321</sup> While Turkey and Russia inch towards a plan about how to settle dispute in Idlib and other areas, Russia hopes Turkey will operate in coordination with Syria. In moving forward, Erdoğan's insistence on using its Astana partners to eradicate any terrorist corridors along the border could signal that Turkey may shift away from previous goals of U.S. cooperation to construct a safe zone.<sup>322</sup>

### *Turkey and Iran*

Iran supports the Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad as a legitimate president and seeks to ensure the Syrian regime's survival.<sup>323</sup> Yet Erdoğan held different approaches than Rouhani and Khamenei towards Assad.<sup>324</sup> Ankara's initial support of Syrian opposition parties raised tensions with Tehran. As a predominantly Shia majority country, Iran feared that a post-Assad Syria ruled by a Sunni majority might adopt a hostile attitude towards Iran and join the list of Sunni-Arab states opposed to Iranian power in the Middle East.<sup>325</sup> In addition, the downfall of Assad would undermine Hezbollah, an important ally of Iran in the region. By some accounts it is suggested that in retaliation against Turkey's support of opposition forces, Iran may have increased its support of Kurdish forces, "turning a blind eye to PKK

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<sup>319</sup> Maxim A. Suchkov, "Putin, Erdoğan Agree on Idlib but maneuver on Kurds," *Al-Monitor*, January 24, 2019.

<sup>320</sup> Fehim Taştekin, "Putin Proposes Old Yet Novel Idea for Turkey-Syria Crisis," *Al-Monitor*, January 29, 2019.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Maxim A. Suchkov, "Russia, Turkey, Iran discuss Syria amid simmering disagreements," *Al-Monitor*, February 15, 2019.

<sup>323</sup> Bülent Aras, "Turkey and Iran discussing the future under the impact of the Arab Spring," *Al Jazeera*, May 5, 2013.

<sup>324</sup> Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry, p.985.

<sup>325</sup> Stephen Larrabee and Alireza Nader, p.9.

activity on the Turkish-Iranian border.”<sup>326</sup> In opposition of Ankara, Tehran constructed a kind of alliance with the PKK to acquire greater functionality in neighborly affairs, namely the fate of Syria, a critical ally for Iran on the Axis of Resistance.<sup>327</sup> Yet, Iran sees the PKK as a destabilizing power, and the Kurdish issue has thus been a central element of Iranian security cooperation with Turkey.<sup>328</sup> Nonetheless, talks are underway between Turkey, Iran, and Russia, and this is unlikely to deter collaboration for peace even if Iranian collusion with Kurdish groups frustrates Turkey.

In late February of 2019, Bashar al-Assad met with Rouhani and Supreme Leader Khamenei in Iran for the first time since the beginning of the Civil War; this orchestrated an opportunity for Tehran to warrant regional credit by showcasing its prevailing involvement in the future of Syria.<sup>329</sup> Unprecedentedly, Rouhani elevated the rights of the Syrian Kurds under the rhetoric of the Adana Agreement and restoration of Assad’s rule, assuming the role of “an honest broker between the various sides” by deploying diplomatic means to soften blows between Turkey and the Kurds.<sup>330</sup> Iran wants to serve as mediator so as to indirectly re-establish Assad’s control, and by default, its own authority.<sup>331</sup> Despite outward progress, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif suddenly resigned following the Iranian meeting with Assad (at this time President Rouhani has not yet acknowledged his resignation), illustrating just how unpredictable of an atmosphere the Syrian Civil War has cultivated in the region.<sup>332</sup>

#### *Recent Negotiations and Their Implications*

Iran continues to posture Assad as one of its most important allies. Rouhani is pleased to be pursuing a pro-Assad agenda and the recent Sochi summit confirmed that Russia and Iran share some general visions for Syria. On February 14th, 2019, Turkey, Russia, and Iran partook in a tripartite summit in Sochi, to discuss the peace process in Syria. This meeting was significantly marked by Trump’s plans to withdraw U.S. troops. In many ways, this decision bore heartfelt news for Rouhani and Putin: Both leaders could go about their intentions establishing Syria’s fate without what they perceived to be Turkish strings being pulled at the hands of the U.S. Erdoğan had joined in the concerns that a continued U.S. intervention would be detrimental to securing Syria’s territorial integrity.<sup>333</sup> The Sochi summit transpired under this pretense but shortly after Trump renounced U.S. intentions to withdraw troops days which is bound to

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid, p.11.

<sup>327</sup> Marianna Charountaki, p.199.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> Al-Monitor, "Intel: How Iran is Trying to Strengthen its Role in Syria by Hosting Assad," February 25, 2019.

<sup>330</sup> Hamidreza Azizi, "For Iran, the Latest Sochi Summit was Not just about Syria," *Al-Monitor*, February 22, 2019.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, "Russia, Turkey, Iran See U.S. Pullout from Syria as 'Positive Step,' Putin Says," February 14, 2019. (Turkey has joined forces with Russia to build a 'safe zone' in Northern Syria and is concerned by any continued US support of the Kurdish YPG which Turkey sees as a threat.)

distress negotiations. Turkey, Russia, and Iran disagreed over who should inherit the US-held Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) territories but now that the U.S. is supposedly back in the game a different resolution will likely be reached.

Despite increased perseverance to end the conflict in Syria, Iran commitment to ensuring Kurdish sovereignty and Russia's devotion to de-escalating Idlib remain as sources of malcontent with Turkey. In Turkey's view, the Adana Accord is a mediocre antidote because it would allow Turkey to pursue PKK fighters in Syria but not to establish any form of military presence.<sup>334</sup> Yet, Syria's outcome glues Turkey to working with Russia and Iran under the auspice of pragmatic rationale that they depend on one another to meet their internal goals and that trilateral cooperation is better than no cooperation.<sup>335</sup> The next tripartite Astana talk is scheduled to take place in March 2019. In the meantime, Erdoğan, Putin, and Rouhani intend to establish a committee tasked with drafting a postwar constitution. Given the reinstatement of American forces on the ground, Washington will be paying close attention as the war finale finally comes to a head.

## **Conclusion**

Beyond the realm of Syria and bilateral ties, Turkey, Russia, and Iran aspire to expand their influences through the arena of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, resulting in another platform of competition. Turkey, Iran, and Russia seek to displace regional power into their own hands, but their efforts to ascertain control are mitigated and counteracted by one another's own agendas. Despite tensions, Ankara has curbed disagreements with Moscow and Tehran to push forth important economic and security pursuits. Rouhani and Putin have enabled a platform for Erdoğan to build his authority in the region which causes Turkey to believe that it does not require the go-ahead from the U.S. to realize its own goals. As Turkey re-evaluates its priorities, its trajectory of engagement with Russia and Iran is likely to continue. Russia and Iran are empowering Turkey to increase its autonomy from the U.S. by strengthening trade ties and providing allegiance. Ankara's autonomous and pragmatic ploys include subjugating Washington to an ideological and realistic threat of engagement with countries historically and aggressively adverse to American interests.

The U.S. must acknowledge that Turkey is unlikely to back away from its rising relationships with Russia and Iran. Instead, the U.S. should co-opt Turkey's reservations with Russia and Iran as points of US-

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<sup>334</sup> Marwan Kabalan, "Can the Astana Process Survive the US Withdrawal from Syria?," *Al-Monitor*, February 16, 2019.

<sup>335</sup> Maxim A. Suchkov, "Three Things the Tehran Summit Exposed about Russia, Turkey, Iran 'Alliance'," *Al-Monitor*, September 9, 2018. (Even back in September 2018 it was clear that Tehran, Moscow and Ankara needed each other and that friction over what to do in Idlib and with the Kurds was irrelevant in the larger scheme of overall cooperation in Syria -in addition, the predicament of US involvement has been removed).

Turkey cooperation by helping Turkey to minimize its dependency and reliance on American rivals. Washington should focus on pressuring Ankara to comply with NATO standards to counterbalance Russian supremacy in the Black Sea. Washington may consider reviewing and updating its sanctions policies on Tehran to liberate indirect economic restraints on Turkey. The U.S. should facilitate Turkey's goal of gaining regional authority by encouraging economic and rhetorical activism to build up Erdoğan's self-confidence, coaxing him to endorse the U.S. as a necessary ally. Therefore, the U.S. should maintain a presence in Syria and engage in talks to ensure that Turkish interests are not sideswiped by Russia and Iran but rather endorsed through practices of American diplomacy.

Looking forward given this review, U.S. actions would appear to maintain nominal sway and liability to merge or distance Turkish-Iranian and Turkish-Russian relations. Turkey shares similar ideas about trade with Russia and Iran, and a compromise or at least openness to talks on Syria indicates a motivation to strengthen alliances. All things considered, it is still unlikely that Turkey would decide to confer unconditionally with Iran and Russia over the U.S. as it remains a powerful global player despite a growing trend of isolationism. In effect, the U.S. can and should continue to intervene and engage with Turkey, but from a critically nuanced standpoint of resetting rather than salvaging relations.

## **Turkey and Beyond**

### **Changing Dynamics: Central Asia and China**

*Danyun Chen*

#### **Introduction**

We can't end this report without looking at Turkey's potential for partnership with Central Asia and the People's Republic of China, which could considerably affect Turkish-American relations. As Turkey's relationships with U.S. partner countries in Europe and the Middle East are on the decline, it is highly possible that Turkey will continue to seek alternative partnerships and transnational organizations in Central Asia and China.

Turkey has always had close relationships with Central Asian states because of its ethnic relations to the Turkic peoples in the region. Turkey continues to seek ways for inserting its influence in this stretch of Turkic-majority states, which includes Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan because of the power vacuum caused by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Turkey also positions itself as a big brother to the region through its state institutions such as TİKA and Türksoy. Moreover, Turkey has gotten closer to China through "the One Belt, One Road initiative" despite their conflicting approaches over the Uyghur community in China. Finally, Turkey's long accession process to the European Union is pushing it toward other transnational organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, previously the Shanghai Five group, a Eurasian political, economic, and security alliance.

This chapter will examine Turkey's relations with Central Asia and China in order to analyze Turkey's latest foreign policy trend of distancing itself from the West and the challenges this presents for the U.S.-Turkey partnership. Turkey's strengthening alliance with these two regions further illustrates the divergence between Turkey and the U.S. and suggests that the U.S. should be conscientious in its policy towards Turkey as to not push away the state from its partnership. Turkey's rising partnership with actors in the region does not pose a direct threat to the U.S., rather, it demonstrates the U.S. needs to restructure its partnership with Turkey to accommodate this shifting reality.

#### **Central Asia**

Since the disintegration of the U.S.S.R. in 1991 and the power vacuum this event left in the region, Turkey has been looking for opportunities to strengthen its influence on the Central Asian states by using its ethnic and linguistic connection to the Turkic peoples. With the emergence of organizations such as TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), Türksoy (International Organization of Turkic

Culture) and the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States (CCTS), Turkey plays an important role not only through ethno-linguistic relations with Central Asia, but also through economic cooperation.

Turkic people are “an ethnic group covering some 140 million people in Central Asia” that speaks related languages and shares certain cultural, historical, and ethnic traits.<sup>336</sup> In the map of the ethno-linguistic groups of Central Asia (Figure 6) shown below, it is evident that the majority of Central Asian population has Turkic-origin. Pan-Turkic activists are visible across Central Asia and support “promoting closer cultural, economic, political ties” with other Turkic states; in that sense, Azerbaijan being the most enthusiastic supporter of Pan-Turkism.

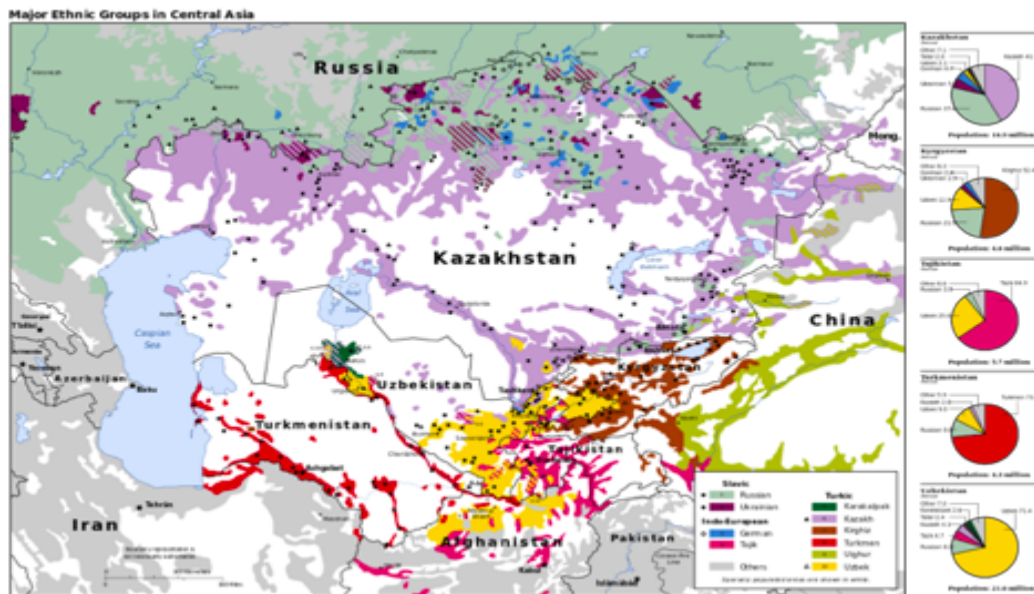


Fig. 6: Major Ethnic Groups in Central Asia (Source: The World Factbook-Central Intelligence Agency)

In addition to the ethno-linguistic ties Turkey shares with its “Turkic sister republics”, Turkey also seeks to fulfill political and economic interests in the region. Central Asia straddles a crucial strategic location connecting Europe and Asia. Turkey sees potential advantages there with trade routes to main powers in Asia. In a 2012 interview, then-Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu stated that Turkey’s primary goals in Central Asia are towards “the efforts for a working democracy and free-market economy; political and economic reform process; political and economic stability and prosperity in the region, (...) [supporting] their vocation toward Euro-Atlantic institutions, and [assisting] them to benefit from their own energy resources.”<sup>337</sup> Turkey’s relationship with Central Asia also shaped through its “Policy of Zero Problems with Neighbors”. In 2010, the then-Foreign Minister Davutoğlu stated that the principle allows

<sup>336</sup> Robert Siegel, “Sons of the Conquerors: The Rise of the Turkic World,” *NPR*, May 23, 2005.

<sup>337</sup> Ryskeldi Satke, Casey Michel, and Sertaç Korkmaz, “Turkey in Central Asia: Turkic Togetherness?,” *The Diplomat*, November 28, 2014.

Turkey to “follow a more cooperative track with a developing economic interdependence between them.”<sup>338</sup>

With the aim to engage more with the Central Asian states, Turkey has set up different cultural and diplomatic institutions to promote its interests in the region through providing cultural and economic supports. TİKA and Türksoy are two examples that best demonstrate Turkey’s efforts in Central Asia. TİKA was formed in 1992 under the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with a focus on the development of Turkic countries and communities which had gained independence from the U.S.S.R. According to its official website, TİKA ensures Turkey’s “dual and regional relations”, and its foreign policy that “displays a multilateral and proactive understanding in the region”. Turkey describes “the recognition of the young Turkic countries by the international community” as its “first priority” because of the economic potential it sees in the region.<sup>339</sup> Also, Türksoy, is another indicator of Turkey’s desire to be an actor in Central Asia, which functions as the UNESCO of the Turkic community. It was established in 1993 upon signed agreement of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Turkey with eight member countries as observers. Türksoy’s headquarters is in Ankara, which gives Turkey more power to influence the development of Turkic culture. The goals of the organization can be listed as “[strengthening] the ties of brotherhood and solidarity among Turkic peoples, [transmitting] the common Turkic culture to future generations and [introducing] it to the world.”<sup>340</sup>

As Turkey pursues its own interests in the region because of Central Asia’s location around Russia and China, some of the Central Asian states are also concerned about Turkey’s position in regional politics. For instance, Uzbekistan heavily criticized Pan-Turkism after the terrorist attacks in Tashkent in 1999, during which the opposition received political asylum in Turkey. Turkmenistan, along with Uzbekistan, have also shown concern for Turkey’s pan-Turkic pursuits and declined an invitation from Kazakhstan for “the creation of a Union of Turkic-speaking nations”.<sup>341</sup> This illustrates that Turkey’s effort in bringing all Central Asian states together is not a shared interest in the region. Uzbek political scientist Farhod Tolipov reaffirms this point by rejecting the notion of potential Turkic solidarity as being merely nominal and limited in scope: “Only Kazakhstan pretends that it supports Ankara”.<sup>342</sup> Although Turkey is highly interested in inserting its power in the region, it seems that Turkey’s self-designated role among the Central Asian states is not embraced by a majority of the regional states. Despite this reality, it is still likely

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<sup>338</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Turkey’s Zero-Problems Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, May 20, 2010.

<sup>339</sup> TİKA, “About Us - TİKA,”

<sup>340</sup> TÜRKSOY, “About: TÜRKSOY,”

<sup>341</sup> Galiya Ibragimova, “Turkey’s Plans for Central Asia Now Include Russia”, *Russia Direct*, August 19, 2016.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

that Turkey will turn to Central Asia for future cooperation as is indicated by its current proactive regional policy approach.

## China

With China's growing power and its many economic initiatives, continued cooperation between Turkey and China is highly likely. Turkey and China have remained strategic partners mainly through "the One Belt, One Road Initiative". This initiative was launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 in an aim to expand China's global influence through infrastructure development and investments in over 65 countries across Europe, Asia, and Africa. Central Asia and



Fig. 7: One Belt, One Road Map (Source: The Economist)

Turkey, thus, have similarly crucial roles in the success of the initiative due to their geostrategic positions straddling the region that connects the East and the West. As can be seen in Figure 7, Beijing's new Silk Road Project goes through Istanbul, which, according to the Chinese Ambassador to Turkey, Yu Hongyang, offers a basis for cooperation between the two states as its goal is to "benefit all countries where the Belt and the Road go through and its people".<sup>343</sup> Istanbul is an essential part of the Belt route because it connects Central Asia and Russia to Europe, making it a crucial station for China in this initiative. It is evident that Turkey, under Erdoğan's administration, has turned towards China as an economic partner in its time of economic turmoil.

China has also shown great effort in bringing Turkey into the initiative through its investments in Turkey. By April of 2018, Turkey witnessed a "sudden spike" in Chinese investments as nearly 1,000 Chinese companies, funded by the Bank of China and Industrial Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), were operating in multiple sectors including energy, infrastructure, finance, tourism and e-commerce.<sup>344</sup> China has also built and operated three power plants in Amasra, Adana, and Konya along with a lignite-powered thermal power plant jointly built by the two countries.<sup>345</sup> Telecommunication investments also play a role in this initiative as China is seeking to create an additional "Digital Silk Road".

<sup>343</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, "China Welcomes Turkey's 'Participation in Belt and Road Partnership,'" September 28, 2018.

<sup>344</sup> Daily Sabah, "Turkey Sees a Sudden Spike in Chinese Investments through Belt and Road Initiative," June 30, 2018.

<sup>345</sup> Daily Sabah, "Turkey Getting More Attractive for Chinese Outbound Investments," December 13, 2017.

On January 25, 2013, the then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan responded to a question about Turkey's European Union bid in an interview with Kanal 24, a Turkish TV station, by saying that he joked with Putin, "Come, accept us into the Shanghai Five and we will reconsider EU."<sup>346</sup> Erdoğan was also quoted in 2016 saying that he didn't see the need to join the EU "at all costs", and that Turkey would consider the possibility of being part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with China, Russia, and other Central Asian countries.<sup>347</sup> With the prospect of EU accession up in the air, Turkey is considering alternative economic partners. The SCO is a prime opportunity for Turkey to receive the economic alliance it is seeking, away from the West. Turkey has already engaged in dialogue with China regarding its potential for membership and will at the very least maintain a close relationship with the organization for its security guarantees. However, whether Turkey joins the SCO or not will not decidedly determine the future of its economic ties to the West. Turkey relies much too deeply on trade and FDI from Europe and the U.S.; and it would require an extremely lengthy and intense process for the state to become entirely independent of the West.

#### *The Uyghur Community*

On November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2001, a document was released by the Chinese government that argued there was a network of Uyghur terrorists associated with Al-Qaida. There had been incidents of unrest and violence in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China for a long period of time. On Chinese social media platforms, Uyghurs are perceived as terrorists who organize violent attacks with the goal of establishing an independent nation-state. A self-fulfilling prophecy, organized Uyghur militancy and terrorism in the region are caused by China's "unjustified labeling of all Uyghurs as a terrorist threat". This can be seen in the experiences of some recently resettled Uyghur refugees from Xinjiang, now living in Turkey, one of whom had fought in the Syrian Civil War. For the noted Uyghur refugee, his goal for participating in the war was "to return to China with knowledge of how to wage war" against the government that had persecuted his community.<sup>348</sup>

China's maltreatment of the Uyghur minority has been an ongoing point of contention between the two states for the past two decades and points to an obstacle in the bilateral relationship. On February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the Turkish Spokesperson from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hami Aksoy, published a statement on the ministry's website "in response to a question regarding serious human rights violations

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<sup>346</sup> Galip Dalay, "Turkey between Shanghai and Brussels," *The New Turkey*, May 14, 2013.

<sup>347</sup> Reuters, "Fed up with EU, Erdoğan Says Turkey Could Join Shanghai Bloc," November 20, 2016.

<sup>348</sup> Sean R. Roberts, "The Biopolitics of China's 'War on Terror' and the Exclusion of the Uyghurs," *Critical Asian Studies* 50, no. 2 (2018): 232–58.

perpetrated against Uyghur Turks and the passing away of folk poet Abdurehim Heyit<sup>349</sup> in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China. Turkey accuses the Chinese authorities for its “reintroduction of internment camps” and its “policy of systematic assimilation against the Uyghur Turks”, going as far as to call the situation “a great shame of humanity”.<sup>350</sup> This statement was later rejected by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chinese spokesperson stated that the poet was “in good health” and that Turkey “made a very bad mistake, quite irresponsible”.<sup>351</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Turkey’s precarious relationship with the West has caused it to seek out alternative partnerships in the East in regions such as Central Asia and China. It’s ethno-linguistic ties with Turkic populations across the region provide a basis for cooperation by which Turkey is able to pursue political and economic interests in both areas. Central Asia straddles a crucial strategic location connecting Europe and Asia which offers Turkey potential advantages for exercising trade routes to main powers in Asia. In terms of the Sino-Turkish relations, although Turkey has been having disputes with China over the Uyghur community, the relationship should not be ignored by the U.S. If to continue, the Sino-Turkish relationship poses a challenge to U.S.-EU-Turkey relations as admission into the SCO could provide Turkey an alternative source for economic and diplomatic partnership. China’s recent economic support during the period of devaluation of lira and Chinese-Turkish cooperation over “the One Belt, One Road Initiative” indicate the both states’ growing relationship.

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<sup>349</sup> Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Statement of the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Hami Aksoy, in response to a question regarding serious human rights violations perpetrated against Uighur Turks and the passing away of folk poet Abdurehim Heyit,” February 9, 2019.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Al Jazeera, “China rejects Turkey criticism on Uighurs, denies poet’s death”, February 11, 2019.

## **Policy Recommendations**

Despite the recent divergence of United States-Turkey interests outlined in this report, it would be unreasonable for the U.S. to sever relations with its NATO ally. Its identity as a Muslim, modernizing society in an optimal geostrategic position to further American foreign policy goals in the Middle East makes Turkey a significant partner for the U.S. However, for the relationship to survive in the coming years, U.S. policy towards Turkey needs to change. Our collective research shows that Turkey has become an independent actor under the leadership of President Erdoğan because of an underlying insecurity regarding the stability of its relationship with the West. Yet, the U.S. and Turkey still have areas of mutual interest under which they can cooperate. For Turkey and the U.S. to be able to collaborate under common goals, their relationship needs to be transactional. Our Task Force suggests the following policy recommendations to ensure a mutually beneficial relationship between the U.S. and Turkey:

### ***Secure Cooperation with Turkey***

Historically, Turkey has been considered a lesser actor in Western institutions such as the EU and NATO. This has caused Turkey to feel devalued and insecure in its relationships with Western states, including the U.S. which in turn, caused Turkey to seek out alternative partnerships. While the U.S. cannot control which states Turkey chooses to ally itself with, it can bolster Turkey's relationship with the U.S. and with European countries in NATO. One way the U.S. should do this is to encourage discussions within NATO and the EU regarding the Syrian refugee issue to alleviate some of the burden placed on Turkey to absorb large numbers of Syrian refugees. If NATO proves it is willing to stand behind Turkey in its bids for security assistance, Turkey will be more willing to play a constructive role in NATO operations. The U.S. should also encourage continued Turkish engagement with NATO operations in the Black Sea region. This will ally Turkey further with NATO and potentially remind Turkey of the limitations in its partnership with Russia. In doing so, the U.S. can reassure Turkey that it doesn't have to choose between its allies in the West and in the East.

### ***Maintain Regional Stability***

Turkey and the U.S. share mutual interests in maintaining regional stability in the Middle East. The major conflict currently destabilizing the Middle East is the civil war in Syria. As the war comes to a close, we recommend the U.S. keep troops in Northern Syria to deter Turkey from attacking the PYD and exercise a strategy that deescalates tension between Turkey and Kurdish factions on the ground. Once the U.S. has created a successful buffer between the two warring factions, the U.S. should facilitate talks between the military arm of the PYD—the YPG—and Turkey to discuss the resettlement of Syrian refugees as well as the situation of the largely Kurdish-populated region. The Kurdish issue is only further harming the

situation in Syria and although Turkey may be reluctant to negotiate, it is in Turkey's interest to help bring the Syrian Civil War to a close to reaffirm its proactive role in the Middle East. This can't be done without some resolution on the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in Syria. If the U.S. enters conversation between the warring factions with Turkish interests in mind, it can show Turkey that despite its alliance with the Kurds throughout the war, it is still an active partner of Turkey that shares a mutual interest in maintaining regional stability.

### ***Engage with the Turkish Government***

The U.S. should work with the Turkish government to understand its interests and encourage liberalization in a way that benefits Turkish society. The U.S. cannot pull Turkey away from its new sense of self and its new partnerships and it cannot expect Turkey to play a complacent role in global politics as it has, at times, in the past. What the U.S. can do is improve on its relationship with Turkey as it is now by proving itself an active, transactional power that cares about and engages with Turkey's interests. Although Turkey seems to be cozying up to rising global powers such as Russia and China, it still cares about its partnerships in the West and what they can offer Turkey. As long as the U.S. maintains strong ties with Turkey, economically and militarily, it is in Turkey's best interest to remain allied with the U.S.

## **Conclusion**

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The divergence of U.S.-Turkey interests indicates that Turkey can't be relied upon as a subservient partner as it once was. For the U.S. to continue working with Turkey it needs to acknowledge this to be true and change its policy towards Turkey to accommodate this new reality. To do this, the U.S. needs to become a transactional partner that is aware of and responds to Turkey's interests where they align with the U.S. It should cooperate with Turkey in areas of mutual interest and criticize Turkey in situations where it is acting independently of the U.S. This sets a precedent that the U.S. is not a partner to be underestimated. In the face of diverging interests, the U.S. should secure cooperation with Turkey when necessary, pursue the mutual goal of maintaining stability in the Middle East, question Turkish actions that work against U.S. interests, and understand that at the end of the day, the U.S. will not be able to control Turkey's shifting alliances but account for the fact that Turkey is no longer the reliable partner it once was. Only then can the U.S. and Turkey stand to gain from their prolonged partnership. The U.S.-Turkey partnership is not what it once was but that does not mean that it is over.

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